**must in death your daylight finish? (-my sun sets to rise again.)**

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# must in death your daylight finish? (-my sun sets to rise again.)

by llamallamaduck

Summary

In which Uchiha Itachi is born, lives and loves as Sirius Black, son of Orion and Walburga Black, brother to one Regulus Black.

It goes about as well as can be expected.

Notes

So - a fair warning. This one is a tad - well, not darker, but moodier perhaps. Shit happens. People are terrible to each other. Walburga Black is just about as pleasant as the Canon would suggest from afar, but now she's front and centre.

Then there's a base-level of trauma from being a child-assassin.

So - yeah. It's not a horror, or a tragedy by any means. It's very much an adventure story. But it's 'harder' than the source texts.

AN, '23 -- Some minor edits for grammar, style etc. Plot-wise, everything remains as it was.

# Chapter 1: Intrerlude

Itachi doesn't remember the first two years of his second life with any clarity.

It's a peculiar phenomenon to the former-Uchiha, now-Black child. His sense of self-identity is rock-solid. He has known who he was from the moment he breathed his second first breath. This is not a mercy.

There are many ways a life can be tragic, but few are as comprehensively terrible as Uchiha Itachi's. He lived a wretched life and died a suitably wretched death. This is where it should have ended.

It had not.

Kabuto drags his soul back, from death into ton-life; hammers it into an unnatural, un-living container. It *hurt*, he remembers. Most of his life can be viewed through different shades and flavours of pain, and his deaths were no different. Life—Death—Not-life—Not-death—

And then—Birth.

Terminal depression hits more or less instantly. There is *nothing* for Itachi here, in this ill-fitting world. The journey he had, the path that was his to walk has been walked, for better and for worse. He is finished. Whatever force had poured his soul into the shell of a newborn miscalculated badly. There is no Sasuke here, to anchor him. No Shisui to drive him. No Hound to guide him. There is just Itachi, without a single leash to keep him from his rightful death.

The beings that populate this new, worse world disagree. They keep his body alive with powers beyond his understanding. It takes some doing, and a bizarre investment of energy and focus but the mysterious beings succeed. They prune, sculpt and adjust; they prod and yank and change until the body can survive and sustain the complexity of his soul. Of his thoughts, to be more precise.

If he really is an infant, his birth givers possibly consider this to be a miracle. Itachi knows it to be a curse. He spent a decade suffering, with only the promise of death to look forward to. And yet—here he is; alive and theoretically functional.

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Itachi can't help but become vaguely aware of his—Parents? Soul-kidnappers? Unwitting wardens? Physically, they are indistinguishable from any other humanoid, in that Itachi's baby eyes can't distinguish them. The one characteristic he does make note of is how reserved they are. They could be hedging their bets, holding their hearts in check until the strange infant's fate is clearer. Alternatively, they could be phenomenally cold people—not unlike some Uchiha he could name. Their reasons are, like all things, entirely immaterial. One way or another, aside from the medics, Itachi's only caretaker is so overwhelmingly supernatural, that seeing them was almost enough to shock him out of his determined amble towards death.

The creature loves him with everything it is. They are also a slave of some kind—which is precisely none of Itachi's business. They fuss over him endlessly and rasp various lullabies that he has no hope of understanding. Perhaps most importantly, they are the only being, human or otherwise, willing to hold Itachi's strange little body. The creature rocks, pets and burps him. Their leathery limbs provide warmth, comfort and security—all those things his infant brain is wired to respond to.

It's possible, Itachi admits, that he is their offspring. Itachi's limbs feel smooth and appear pink, he could grow into bat ears and grey-brown skin. Should he survive past the day he is physically able to hold a blade, of course, which is unlikely.

In a sense, the strong vein of apathy dominating the depressive episode is why he still lives. He can't muster up the energy to do what has to be done. His caretaker takes their duty of care seriously; they will intervene at the first sign of damage to his charge. If Itachi ever manages to scrounge up the willpower, he will have to take swift and decisive measures to ensure he stays dead.

Drifting is the only path forward, so he works on getting a handle on this new body. As weeks and months go by, he manages to slow down his heart rate and dim the world until only the eternal blackness of his mind is left. There is no space for despair, rage, fear and sorrow. There is nothing at all; the closest approximation of death his mind can build.

Regulus Black breathes his first two years into Itachi's go at dying by sheer force of will. Or lack of will, depending on the viewpoint.

It changes—*everything*.

# Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Regulus Black, between one heartbeat and the next, becomes Itachi's entire world.

The person who introduces him to Regulus Black is bland, unambiguous and entirely without consequence. In truth, they could have been Izanagi Himself, come down from the heavens, and Itachi wouldn't have had attention to spare; not when they held the most beautiful baby boy alive. Any notion of apathy flies out of the realm of possibilities.

—A brother—A brother—*His* brother—

The pink ball of squirming human is everything that one could want in a baby. It's loud, it's wrapped in all the baby fat Itachi's medically engineered body hasn't managed to hold on to. He sleeps, now, little nose twitching randomly, tiny-teeny fingers clenched around Itachi's.

Regulus Black, in short, between one heartbeat and the next, becomes Itachi's entire world.

Their cribs are separate but bridged together. They hadn't been at first, but as it happens, Itachi's new body is just as capable of commanding the mystical powers wielded by the other humans in this new world. The first attempt at separating the brothers goes peacefully; Itachi simply flies Regulus back without further censure. The second person who tries is firmly pushed back.

This is when they should have stopped to examine their goals. The third unlucky person is set summarily on fire, following the tried and true Uchiha problem-solving methodology. In deference to the lack of ill-will on the offender's part, he focused only on their garments, and not, say, their eyes and hair. The threat is, nevertheless, clear.

His brother stays with him. Or else.

It's his caretaker-creature who tries next, old and creaky and terribly proud. Their wrinkles are so deeply set, that they double as river-beds for the tears streaming down their face.

The humans audibly hold their breath, waiting to see what will happen to the creature. Their —nanny?—is wiser than all of them combined. They snap their fingers, producing a wave of energy and, just like that, another crib materialises next to Itachi's. Another snap, and a wide, padded bridge grows between the two. Grows. Out of nothing.

For the first time, a smile sneaks onto Itachi's face; an atrophied, weak grimace, true, but a real emotion that isn't a plea for death. The intensity of the day wears him out pretty quickly. He falls into oblivion within minutes. For the first time in decades, he looks forward to waking up.

A brother—a brother—a brother—

His life, he decides, began the day he laid his eyes on his baby brother. With that in mind, the time has come to take stock of what, exactly, is going on here.

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He starts his investigations with the basics. What is he?

The obvious answer is a human. He *looks* like a human, his body is roughly that of a normal toddler of one or two years. He can crawl, and his adult mind is perfectly able to guide his body into focused movement without much trouble. Physically, he's hardly a picture of health but, considering he refused to so much as lift his head for years, it's a miracle he is as functional as he is.

What can he deduce about his environment?

Not much. His worldview is sadly limited to his crib, and the part of the room his baby eyes can see. The decorations are predictably off-putting. Some people—Shisui comes to mind—would see beauty in the grandeur, the drama of the golden elements, complicated, frilly designs and boldly painted ceilings. Itachi wants to set it all on fire.

The language is a different brace of kunai. The sound and shape of the strange syllables are fascinating, from an academic standpoint. There is more variation in them, and new, exciting letters, rounder and springier than what he is used to. It's *hissy,* too, which is fascinating; Orochimaru would have been right at home.

The plasticity of his infant mind combined with his adult attention span made picking it up a breeze. His caretakers spotted his new interest in the world, and swiftly employed a young female he assumes to be human for the sake of the clarity of his internal monologue. The woman started his lessons swiftly and with great ambition.

Downplaying his intellect would have been the smart thing to do; the Shinobi thing to do. He doesn't, of course. His priorities are one (1) Regulus and a distant two (2) his creature-nanny. Everything else is to be dismissed with all the aloof disinterest the firstborn son of Uchiha Fugaku and Uchiha can summon. He learns what there is to learn, and doesn't give it thought beyond that. This may have cemented his place as a prodigy once again, but the situation is markedly different this time. He's learned his lessons; anybody would be hard-pressed to manipulate him with the moniker.

With increased language comprehension, communication with his nanny becomes more than a vague notion. The concept of first words does not apply, to him in any meaningful way; jot after a whole life lived. That said, he respects the symbolic value. As soon as he managed to wrap his tongue around all those 't's, 'r's and 's's, he squeaks 'brother', and considers that mission complete.

As for little Regulus, he lived and gurgled and made a mess of everything as one would expect from an infant. Neither of them saw their parents much, perhaps once every week, and even then from a distance. Their creature-nanny, however, is omnipresent. If they're alone, they are in plain view, grumbling and creaking, petting and rocking. If the humans are there, they retreat into the shadows, available but invisible. A perfect servant (a perfect slave). Sensing it is easy; the being's energy signature is subtle but strong—much like the being. The three of them are a happy little family, he thinks with no little joy.

These halcyon days are hardly going to last, he is very aware of that, but damn if they were not the softest, most comforting time he can remember (he can imagine). The one glaring hiccup happened when his fool mind had to ask the obvious question. If Itachi is Sirius, could Regulus be Sasuke?

The answering wave of pain that stabs into his spine and spreads, as pain does, into every cell of his body, is well deserved. What are you *thinking?* Sasuke is alive and well, somewhere far away, in a world of his own. He has, by now, adopted a clutch of adorable babies with that blonde boyfriend of his and makes a living raising goats on top of a mountain, somewhere far away from Konoha's poison. Regulus is Regulus, his baby brother, his second chance at not being a blight on the world. Regulus is a happy baby that will grow up a happy, little boy and, later, a happy, self-actualised man with a family and everything he ever wanted. If Itachi has to slaughter civilisations to do it, well, they brought him here, so they only have themselves to blame.

His nanny interrupts him before he can start making blood vows, which might have been a touch over-dramatic for a two-year-old. Regardless, vows are pageantry. Itachi's soul is set, and a clear goal is in place.

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It seems like no time at all has passed before Regulus' first birthday has come and gone. Their parents didn't throw a celebration, which is hardly surprising. Itachi never had any, either. Instead, their creature-nanny spent a full hour summoning tens of thousands of iridescent bubbles, adding in little shooting starts for spice. Regulus found the whole thing world-changing. Itachi, who grew up in a Clan of illusionists, wasn't more impressed by the chorus of his brother's clear, bright peals of laughter, contrasted with the deeper, guttural grunts of laughter from their nanny.

By then, Itachi—apparently named Sirius—could speak more or less fluently and could toddle about on weak, wobbly legs without much issue. Kreacher—their creature-nanny—remained their one constant caretaker, which only grew more noticeable when the river of medics turned into a river of tutors. The only real difference is the barely noticeable uptick in parental visitation. It's hardly sentiment that drives them—they have no interest in Regulus yet—but they aren't as cruel as they could be; as they might yet become.

Existing without Regulus in his field of vision is challenging. Itachi's mind is still very much a desperate patch job, most of these patches centring on Regulus. The majority of his psyche

is bombarding him with suggestions about what he should do to the wretched creatures that dared separate him from his purpose. The leftover bit—the bit he tries to listen to—is telling him this is for the best. The goal is not to be *comfortable.* The goal is to make sure Regulus is healthy, stable and happy. He is hardly going to be any of these things if his brother can't let him out of sight for more than a second.

He redirects the anger at the separation as best he can, by being as creepy and unsettling at his parents. He doesn't smile at them or show any resemblance to a normal human child. Instead, Instead, they converse politely in stilted tones about his education, his responsibilities and the glory of Most Ancient and Noble House Black.

If his parents mind—Lord and Lady Black, as they had introduced themselves, or Orion and Walburga Black, as Kreacher whispered to him covertly, deep in the cover of the night—they don't show it. Lord Black has no use for him, nor does he seem interested in finding one. Lady Black, on the other hand, seems determined to sculpt him into something useful. If things had been different, if Itachi were the type to be motivated by spite, he might have decided to give her what she wished for. Lady Black, for all that she was formidable herself, was a terrible sculptor of men. Her instructions would have produced a psychopath, a revolutionary or a corpse.

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"Do you understand, child," asks Walbuga sharply, having sensed his mind wandered. She is an objectively beautiful woman, however little Itachi can judge these things. Physically, she and Mikoto had very little in common. Psychologically, the similarities compound. They are both dominant women, vicious and cruel when the mood strikes them, and blessed with a clear and fanatical clarity of purpose.

"Yes." He inclines his head slightly, keeping the sneer from his face with some effort. A sneer has no place on a three-year-old's face anyhow.

Grudging approval flashes over her face before it's smoothed into white marble. "We will move on, then. You will begin calligraphy lessons on Friday. If your performance remains satisfactory Regulus will be allowed to remain with you. If not, he will be deemed a distraction, and promptly removed to the nursery. Is that understood?"

“Yes,” repeats Itachi. He doesn’t speak much during these meetings. He isn’t expected to. Children are to be spoken to, not listened to.

“That is all,” Walburga declares, the very image of a stern monarch. “Kreacher will take you to the nursery. Merry part.”

“Merry part, Mother” He folds his body into a fair approximation of a bow, considering the physics of toddler bodies and how they are in no way meant to bow. “Father.”

He endures their nods and is thankfully whisked away by Kreacher in moments. Sage wept, these people.

The room rematerialises around them, and he can finally relax. Stiff joints screech at him, body unhappy with being used so mercilessly for hours at a time. He pays it no mind because his brother is there, dozing and drooling, a picture of angelic innocence.

“Are you well, young master?”

The being’s eternal caution of his Masters’ wrath is—something. Itachi certainly doesn’t have the emotional capacity to process the seething knot of emotions that grow that much more complicated whenever he thinks about it. For all the complex shades and flavours of depravity that it excelled in, Elemental Nations hadn’t dabbled in slavery. They did brainwashing and institutionalised abuse, assault and exploitation, but—Alright, so the Hyūga came close. Maybe. His head throbs in tandem with the rolling stomach. It doesn’t matter. Itachi—Sirius—doesn’t know what to do about his one real caretaker’s situation; that’s the important part.

“I am, Kreacher, thank you for asking.” Making his voice warm is a work in progress, but he tries to show his goodwill by leaning into Kreacher’s arms and closing his eyes.

“Kreacher is glad.” Soft arms envelop him, and he shamelessly pastes himself bodily to his nanny. It won’t be long until he’s taller than Kreacher, so he hoards these all-encompassing hugs as much as he can. Not for the first time, he grumbles about the unfairness of not being Kreacher’s son in truth, and not just in deed. Like all the previous times, Kreacher grumbles

right back how the young master shouldn't even be thinking such things, how he is certainly old and clever enough to know better.

"We both know I'm right," he says, following along the familiar script.

"Silly child," Kreacher replies, finishing the traditional back-and-forth. The soft glint in his eyes is there, and his weathered old face crinkles into a smile. Itachi decided months ago he will see these crinkles form into proper wrinkles, and his pseudo-parent will have proof of joy on his face, and not just misery.

"How is my brother?" There is only so much mush he can handle, without risking a flood of emotions that will imbalance him for weeks.

"Young master Regulus is as well-behaved as could be. Fed and watered and growing strong."

Away from any judging eyes, Itachi is free to toddle to his brother without minding his steps. His balance is predictably awful, which is as it should be considering he is mostly head, still.

"Will young master let Kreacher help this time?"

"Not yet."

Now in front of the crib, he closes his eyes and steadies his breathing, syncing it with his heartbeat. In-out. In-out.

When he's fully settled into a semi-meditative trance, he starts looking for the odd energy flowing through his body.

The energy—magic, of all the ridiculous names—is different from Chakra by every metric he has. Whatever it is and however it works, it's nowhere near as structured and orderly. There

are no clear pathways that he can sense, not much rhyme or reason to its flow. The only constant he could find after months of observing it is that it's shaped by will and belief.

Up. Up. Up.

Thing is, Itachi knows some things are true and some things are not. Fire is his friend, for example. That has been true for a hundred generations of his family and it's been true for him. Using this mystical woo-woo energy to set some idiots on fire is easy. Simple. If he needed to walk on walls, make himself fast or breathe underwater, he would have done it without issue. In contrast, men don't *fly*.

It doesn't help that he knows it's possible. He's flown his brother to him hundreds of times. He's flown himself to Regulus just as often. But, instinctively, subconsciously, *sincerely*, Itachi knows men don't fly.

Up. Up. Up.

The deeper into his mind he goes, the clearer his awareness of his magic becomes. Right now, he's deep enough that he can feel magic drifting in and out of his body, bobbing around him like a confused cloud.

Up. Up. Up.

Kreacher shuffles forward, which means it's time to stop. Kreacher has proven to be a supportive, if anxious participant in Itachi's training, but only if he's sure it's safe. It only took Itachi overestimating his strength and passing out, for Kreacher to set firm and unyielding rules.

"Alright," he says, standing up from his seize, and shaking out his limbs as best he can.

"Next time, little star. You is too young to be doing serious magic."

“Are,” Itachi corrects absently. “You *are* too young. Thank you. I will sleep now, I think.”

“Kreacher will keep you safe.”

He could blame his infant body for being so utterly charmed by this, but he knows better. It’s been a long time since anyone cared to keep him safe, and Kreacher is as valiant a protector as anyone could hope for.

“I know you will,” he whispers, wrapped around his brother, sleep taking him.

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You can tell a lot about a culture and a people, Itachi wonders, by what they teach their children.

In his case, his first two childhoods trudge along similar beats. The militaristic, austere methodology of childrearing is an obvious touch-point. The material is another. The subtext of the material, to be more precise.

The first thing that stood out to him, once he started to pay more close attention, is how much emphasis is put on hierarchy, and one’s place in it. The initial thrust of his tutors’ efforts is to make his place absolutely clear, to make him internalise at age three, that he is Heir Black before he is Sirius Black. Strike while the iron is hot; go in hard with depersonalisation before the child has had the chance to build a sense of self, and you can use the malleability of human nature to build yourself a good Clansman.

Once you killed it, you start constructing the child’s ego yourself, building it into a useful shape. You can be as arrogant and vicious as you want, only aim it towards outsiders. You are but a small cog in the Black mechanism, but nothing else is worth being at all. You are to be the very best, a natural-born leader of lesser men—but you will also be a humble servant of your Lord and Lady. You belong at the very top, but nothing you will ever do will outweigh the circumstances of your birth.

Itachi already sat through these lessons once, so it's both amusing and dull to do so again. To say nothing about how much of a waste of time it is. There is simply nothing anyone can do by this point to indoctrinate Itachi. Regulus already has him, but this time around he will in no way presume to lead or guide him. Everybody else can hang.

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His fifth and sixth years storm by in the same unforgiving duality. There is downtime with Regulus and Kreacher—love and peace and warmth—and the time for work—endless lessons on etiquette, elocution, mastering his body language, calligraphy and on and on it goes.

Walburga capitalised on Itachi's maturity and focus. Time spent with Regulus becomes currency, similar to how his performance is, to her. They make stiff, civilised deals in terse tones; an exchange of goods and services, one might say. Itachi continues to be a genius who can retain information faster than an adult, and she allows him uninterrupted time with his precious baby brother who has just begun to speak in full sentences.

Nobody has brought up the matter of magic. Itachi's magic was, as he's come to learn, undeniable from the very beginning. There is something there, a secret regarding his birth that hangs over the household. All things considered, the most likely explanation is that he lashed out, during those initial, terrible moments straight after birth; he was terribly upset about it all.

Regulus, on the other hand, has been growing up in a markedly different environment from Itachi in either life. Kreacher and Itachi are a terrifying pair of gatekeepers, and they made sure their bright star grows up safe and happy at all times. His brother's magic, therefore, manifests in more healthy ways. He would summon little balls of light when he wants attention and hover over his crib when he is happy; that sort of thing. Walburga hasn't been present for any of it, but Kreacher has, and his word is beyond questioning—he couldn't misrepresent the truth if he wanted to. Itachi would be very surprised if this, in comparison, weak show of magic doesn't cause problems sooner rather than later. This means he needs to step up his training.

"Pardon the interruption, Mother, but when will I start training in magic," he asks Lady Black, near the end of a long session of memorising the Black family tree.

The odd question gives her pause, and she looks over her firstborn with detached, shrewd eyes. “You will, as every Black has, attend Britain’s premier Magic Academy, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Children aren’t trained in magic use before they turn eleven, as their cores are thought to be too unstable and prone to irreparable damage.”

They gaze at each other blankly for a long series of moments, both aware of the obvious error in that sentence. Itachi—Sirius—has been consciously using magic for many a year now, albeit with great effort, and middling results.

“Blacks don’t much bother with whatever bit of legislation the Ministry thinks to shove down our throats, but in this, the consensus was made and accepted before our time. Children are not to be instructed. What they do in their own time is, ultimately, up to them.”

Itachi doesn’t nod, because that’s a plebeian gesture that will be met with corrective measures. Instead, he inclines his head gently, to show her point was acknowledged. It certainly *is* acknowledged. He can hardly believe what he heard.

“Your tutors tell me you have been performing to our expectations. I have, therefore, decided you deserve a reward, namely, access to our library. You will not have leave to enter it yourself until your Presentation. Kreacher will bring you the texts you require.”

She pauses, piercing eyes scanning him for any sign of enthusiasm or disappointment. When she doesn’t find any, the corner of her lip twitches into a smirk.

“Do not mistake this privilege as permission for frivolous pursuits. Your Father and I expect you to take this opportunity to start your never-ending path of self-improvement.” She waits for his aristocratic version of a nod and continues. “Some texts are dangerous, some are malicious, some will strangle any spark of life in your body. Kreacher knows them all. Keep in mind, should you die, Regulus will take your place as Heir.”

Itachi’s eyes cool, the only sign of her barb having struck home. The Lady notices, of course, and her smirk sharpens, transforming the casual cruelty into something a great deal more targeted.

“That is all. Merry part.”

“Merry part,” murmurs Itachi, voice as smooth as ice.

Children are not allowed to walk through the halls of the House of Black until they have had their Presentation. Kreacher smoothly teleports him away, although not directly to their nursery.

Not for the last time, he praises the forethought and care Kreacher and he have put into this system. When dealing with Lady Black, it’s best to keep one’s emotions safely locked away, otherwise, you risk revealing more than you can afford. His major weakness is clear to anyone who cares to look, but there are more, hidden in the shadow of his fanatical love for Regulus. His love for Kreacher, for example, they have somehow managed to keep a secret. His grudging determination to train himself into at least a passable level of lethality, is another.

His magical training has hit a hurdle and the cause is clear. He keeps all his darker thoughts locked away at all times and doesn’t allow anything more intense than indulgent fondness. How is he, then, going to attempt to master a force so intrinsically linked to his emotions and psyche?

And, so, they have the basement. Working through the darker aspects of his trauma is distressing enough without the added fear of what he might do if he doesn’t get himself under control. As with any child of magic, his grief and pain have very material consequences.

The basement is the perfect place to vent. He can’t imagine that even decades of therapy will make him healthy, but their aim is much more modest. All these venting sessions are meant to do, is give him a chance to expel Walburga-shaped poison out of his soul. There are many ways to twist a mind, and hers might be spectacularly unwise, but it is no less effective for it. He would have become something at least as cold as cruel as her, only with an added lifetime of slaughter and villainy.

“Thank you, Kreacher,” he grits out, eyes already glazed with rage. “Please come get me when Regulus is finished with his lessons.”

“As you say,” replies his dear nanny, tone solemn but accepting.

“Merry part.”

“Merry part, silly child,” mutters his parent, before popping away.

# Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Days with Regulus.

"Siri," babbles his precious brother. "Siri woof!"

Where exactly his brother picked up an obsession with dogs is a question for the ages, Itachi thinks. He never even saw one in person. Everything he knows about them, he learned from tutors and Itachi and Kreacher's dubious artistic talents. Does that count for anything? It doesn't. Regulus adores dogs with a charming fanatical energy. Alas, brothers will do as brothers will do. If it's dogs Regulus wants, it's dogs he will get.

He's done this enough times by now, he's filed the prep work down to the minimum. Inhale-exhale. Visualise a dog you want to the last strand of fur—slightly overlarge paws, lean body, short fur, longish snout, floppy ears, intelligent eyes, thin tail. Imagine your magic filling the invisible balloon of the dog. Saturate your magic with the idea of a dog—loving, enthusiastic, energetic, clumsy, desperate for your love. Tie it up with an iron-clad belief you can create the mirage of a dog.

Voila.

An objectively fetching little adolescent dog forms out of thin air. It's all lights, in truth, shades of grey smoke, forming an image—little more than a three-dimensional illusion which is why it comes so easily to him. Itachi is no Fugaku, but he was an adept illusionist before his eyesight became what it had.

The dog can't produce sound, but Regulus's imagination is more than active enough to compensate. He shrieks in glee and immediately starts an incomprehensible game with the conjuration. Itachi knows from experience the game will last for hours until Regulus is exhausted enough to fall asleep.

The five-year-old boy has matured in a very interesting way, all things considered. Innocence cannot last in the House of Black, not in any meaningful form. Regulus learnt quickly just how unimpressed the Lord and Lady Black are with his cheerful nature and childish petulance.

The solution he decided on is worrying but the best Itachi could hope for. Regulus can't play an adult for their parents as Itachi could, but he learned to be still, quiet and meek. He sits through what meetings and tutoring sessions he needs to without complaint. When they're alone, all the ill-gotten maturity slides off the boy, and he transforms into what he should be—a carefree child with more energy than sense and a heart big enough to engulf the entire world. Even with the darker lessons their parents have begun poisoning him with, Regulus never once believed them over Itachi or Kreacher.

If the old elf was soft on Itachi—and he was—it doesn't even begin to compare how indulgent he is with the youngest son of House Black. Nothing that Regulus wanted was beyond reach, even if it had disastrous consequences. When Regulus wanted a fire-crab, and wouldn't hear the word no, Kreacher straightened to his full size and popped off. An hour later, Regulus' fire-crab lay forgotten in a bucket, while the two brothers did their best to help their nanny with his shattered fingers and burnt ears. Needless to say, it took days for the inconsolable boy to stop crying, so much so that Itachi had to resort to illusions to keep their tutors from noticing.

It's hard to see such traumas now when Regulus is shrieking and giggling and showering his ghost-dog with kisses and hugs. While his gentle nature wasn't entirely stamped out, he has learned to shield his heart when he must.

"How were your lessons, little brother," he asks before the boy can exhaust himself beyond hope. Usually, Kreacher reports on such things, but he has been away for the day, tending to the Black Family greenhouses.

A shadow darkens sparkling grey eyes for a moment before it's quickly tucked away. "Boring. I had Tutor Malfoy today, which was fun, but also Tutor Rowle."

Hold on.

"Tutor Rowle," he asks mildly. "I thought you had Tutor Rosewood for the genealogies?"

He looks close enough to spot the flash of wariness. His little brother is trying to hide something. Cute, but pointless.

“Tutor Rosewood is entering Seclusion soon, I think. Tutor Rowle was hired until her Heir is born.” The disaffected tone would be more convincing if Itachi didn’t know his little brother quite as well as he did. As it is, he knows that, if everything was as it should be, Regulus would have spent at least an hour talking about how the lovely Ms Mai will have a baby soon and how pretty the baby will be and how he will marry the baby or Ms Mai depending on the mood.

“Interesting. I wasn’t informed of this.” He needs to approach this carefully. Regulus can be tight-lipped at the most inopportune moments if he thinks he is protecting either Kreacher or Itachi. “Have I mentioned Tutor Rowle was my instructor once upon a time?”

“Oh, I know,” mutters Regulus, with a surprising amount of venom. He realises his mistake immediately and tries to brush it off, but it’s too late.

“Well, now,” says Itachi, thoughts slowing down to prevent himself from overreacting. While burning down this tomb of a house would be cathartic, it will leave Regulus with nowhere to live. Not to mention the fact that his brother, miraculously, still cares for their parents. No, it’s best to think about this clearly. “I think it’s safe to assume, little brother, that Tutor Rowle will no longer be instructing you. I will take over your lessons myself if need be. You don’t need to worry about, ah, boring lessons, going forward.”

Intelligent or not, Regulus is five. There is only so much complexity his little brain can handle. Something bad has happened, and now it won’t happen anymore. His unshakable certainty that Itachi can make everything better is not, strictly speaking, a good thing, but it makes Itachi’s heart warm, so he hasn’t tried to correct it yet.

“Love you, Siri.”

“Likewise, little brother.”

“Mother, may I have a word?”

He sends the note off via an equally furious and proud Kreacher and slides back to mission-focus. This is important. One way or another, this meeting will pave the way for all future interactions with his biological parents.

Kreacher pops back and spears him with a sharp look. “Mistress will see you now.” He pauses for a moment, struggling for words. “You will behave, young Master. You’s have done enough already.”

“You have,” he corrects gently and arranges his lips into a smile. “I always behave, but you needn’t worry. I am confident Lady Black will see things my way.”

Kreacher looks one moment away from twisting Itachi’s ear in frustration, before rallying. “Take care, silly child,” he repeats, before popping them away.

As usual, Kreacher retreats to the shadows without being seen, which leaves Itachi faux-alone with his mother.

“Merry meet, Mother.” The tone is perfect, as is his bow. Things like this come easy when you’re employing the type of focus necessary for assassinations.

“Merry meet, child. I hope you have good reasons for this interruption?”

Itachi rises from his bow and meets her eyes squarely. “I thought it wise to inform you Tutor Rowle will no longer be available to tutor Regulus.”

“Oh?” Confusion flashes across her face, quickly replaced with indifference.

“As it happens, I burnt his wand to a crisp, damaging his wand-arm in the process.” He could keep the note of smug blood-hunger from his voice if he wanted to, but he hardly needs to.

His mother pauses for a brief moment, torn between curiosity, scepticism and an instinctive urge to censure just about everything. “Your reasons?”

Itachi tilts his head. “The fool raised his wand to Regulus. I took issue.”

She goes through a complicated sequence of micro-expressions too quickly for him to interpret. He spotted satisfaction, rage, and doubt. Also an irrational revulsion to a taboo. Witches and wizards have an unhealthy obsession with their wands. Rowle would be in his rights to demand satisfaction for this insult from the House Black. If he’s especially stupid he will demand an honour duel.

“By yourself,” she asks after several long beats of silence. “You disarmed Rowle and destroyed his wand without the aid of, say, Kreacher?” Her tone grows from frosty to faintly approving, which for her is effusive approval.

“I am perfectly capable of dealing with any being who harmed Regulus. In this case, Rowle was in error, but not so much of a one to deserve a permanent solution.” He is playing it up, sure, but not as much as she thinks. If the fool did more than use stinging hexes on Regulus, Itachi would not have let him off with a few first-degree burns.

“Well, well, child,” says Walburga. “Should I bother to ask how you went about it?”

“Nothing too spectacular.” He replies. “I met him at the floo and set his wand on fire with, I admit, some prejudice. It exploded, hence the subsequent wounds. The brute thought, correctly, that retreat was the safer option and flooed back to whatever hole he resides in.” A pinch of snobbery to tie the whole thing together.

Walburga chuckles, the sound, deep and velvety and very suitable. He’s never thought to hear the sound from her mouth, but apparently, violence does it for her. Who knew?

“A reward, child. Name it.”

Well, now. This presents an interesting opportunity and one that’s not likely to repeat any time soon. His dubious rewards have thusfar been double-edged things. Books, but only ‘appropriate’ ones. Choice of attire, but only ‘suitable’ ones. This is open-ended, and deliberately so.

He doesn’t even have to think about it.

“A barghest.”

“Agreed,” replies the Lady, slightly surprised, but ultimately disinterested. “I trust you are aware of your responsibility to the beast?”

“Regulus and I are more than up to the task of handing it.”

“That is all, then. I have to rearrange my schedule to fit in Lady Rowle at the first available opportunity. Kreacher can acquire your new—pet.”

“Thank you, Mother. Merry part.”

“Merry part,” echoes the Lady, already a million miles away. She’s dismissed him, and so he no longer exists. Sage.

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As expected, Regulus is over the moon about his new dog. The dog itself—a magical breed, naturally—will grow up into a massive, shaggy beast. For now, he’s a gangly puppy, more

paw than body, and he knows very well that, while Itachi is nominally in charge, Regulus calls the shots. His adoration of his brother is unfeigned, though, so Itachi counts it as a win.

Kreacher is not at all as sanguine. “Hairs, everywhere,” he mutters. “Young Masters have not a lick of sense between them; not one.”

“A friend will be good for him,” says Itachi—who really should have learned to use his new name by now. “He’s got the two of us, but a boy needs some uncomplicated love in his life.”

“Young Master’s friends should not slobber,” snaps the old elf. It’s all bluster. Even Itachi, who doesn’t much like dogs at all, isn’t immune to his effortless charm. Kreacher has already acquired a comically comfortable bed, enough meat to feed a pack of lions, and a selection of toys each one more opulent than the last. He’d have included a diamond-studded collar if the dog allowed himself to be collared.

“Young Master will have a barghest to stand between him and any who would think to harm him,” Itachi replies. It’s not the only consideration he’s had—the mythology around the species is fascinating—but it’s high up there. A barghest is rare, available only to the wealthy, and even then most shy away from the creatures. Some went so far as to say they were close cousins to the Grim—an entirely mythical creature as far as he could tell. Since the House of Black is already considered the Darkest of the Dark, Itachi figured they had little to lose. They’re playing into the stereotype, yes, but it gained Regulus a fearsome protector whose howl paralyses its victims. So. There is that.

“You’s going to train the beast,” sniffs Kreacher. “Or make it wear a collar. One wrong howl and off its head goes.”

Itachi nods. “I’m sure we will reach an agreement. It seems a fairly clever little thing, for all that it’s a baby. We don’t have to worry about howling before it’s fully grown and, by then, I’m sure it will be smart enough to see reason.”

Regulus interrupts their rather parental discussion “Siri, Siri, Siri,” whoops the boy, bouncing up and down and left and right, magic lending him extra buoyancy. “A puppy, a puppy, a puppy.”

So cute.

“Yes, little brother. I am aware. I gave him to you, didn’t I?”

“Siri, Siri, Siri,” continues Regulus, undaunted by plebian things such as narrative and conversation. “What will you call him? Siriii?”

Itachi can’t help ruffling the already messy locks. Behind him, the puppy is just as exuberant, if less certain of his welcome. “Oh, alright,” he mutters and crouches down to give the dog a scritch. “Yes, yes, you’re adorable.”

When Regulus starts vibrating in place, Itachi turns to him. “He’s your puppy. You name him.”

“No, no, Siri, no! You have to name him!.”

Two pairs of pleading eyes stare him down, and yeah, alright, it’s perhaps best for Itachi to name the poor thing. If it were up to Regulus he’d name him Flower or Bunny or some such nonsense.

“Atlas,” he says in the end, crouching in front of the dog, meeting its eyes. “Your name is Atlas, because you will have to keep my whole world in your care and not falter in your task.”

“Siri,” wails Regulus, overcome with emotion, and the two friends execute a flawless manoeuvre which ends with Itachi lying on his back covered with a boy and a dog, both equally eager to show their appreciation.

“Silly children,” says Kreacher from the back, but still leans over to scratch behind the newly named Atlas’ ear.

# Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The storm.

Chapter Notes

Warning. Graphic violence. Serious themes. Disturbing imagery. Those sensitive to violence, domestic abuse, and so forth, best skip the chapter entirely

Looking back, it was perhaps obvious that something was going to happen sooner or later. There is only so much smooth sailing the Universe will allow before it decides their grace period is over.

In this case, the steady descent into hell began on the day of his Presentation. Not much has changed over the years. He's grown a little, his hair grew to the appropriate length for his station and his gait a little smoother. The years have overall been kind to him. Regular venting sessions and Regulus's boundless love have helped heal the worst of his evil.

He will need all this newfound stability for tonight. The concept of a Presentation is not a new one; the Uchiha did something similar. A child is not technically *alive* until its sixth year when it is presented to the Clan and, later, the Outsiders. The noble Houses in this new world did something similar. The children aren't to be seen by anyone other than the parents until their Presentation when the child turns nine.

It's more or less polite fiction, of course. A small army of healers and tutors have met and regularly interact with Sirius and Regulus, to say nothing of the infamy that surrounded him since birth. Everyone and their cat has heard about the Black Heir, starting from his difficult birth and early years, followed by his genius status and an eerie grasp of wandless magic. It all fits into their preconceived notions of what a Black Heir would be. Beautiful, Dark, cruel, violent.

Kreacher dressed him in sublime robes for the special occasion. It's considered gauche to wear Jewelry at one's Presentation. To get around this inconvenient rule—how is the House of Black going to display their wealth?—they focused their attention on the material. The traditionally snow-white robe is made out of silk delicately interwoven with straws of silvery metal; a version of platinum, he'd assume. It's heavy enough to fall to the ground, but soft enough to spill over his shoulders and back in soft, subtle lines. His hair is caught by a simple silver band, with a few curls left to frame his face.

All in all, Sirius Black is a pretty little doll, with large, distressingly pale grey eyes, elegant mouth, and high cheekbones. It's an alien type of beauty to him, but even the Uchiha Elders would be waging war to get him into their gene pool.

Only one problem remains. One immovable, unsolvable problem. Unsurvivable, even.

Regulus has managed to contract Dragon Pox, which Sirius has suffered through way back, around year two, slightly before Regulus shone a light into his life. The young boy is miserable, delirious with a fever, terrified and in a lot of pain, and Sirius has to leave him for the night.

But, leave him, he must. The Presentation is the most socially charged event of the decade. The Presentation of the Black Heir is going to be attended by every Noble House in Europe at the very least, and a few more besides. His Grandfather, Lord Arcturus Black—the Head of House Black, and thus the highest-born Aristocrat in Britain—graciously allowed the event to be hosted in Castle Black, and guests have been pouring in from all corners of the world for hours already.

Sirius has to go. They might not lose their lives if they mess this up, but torture is absolutely on the table. Sirius is adept at wandless magic, but not enough to stand up to two enraged adult magic users and win. He could perhaps assassinate them, but in a straight-up battle, he'd be toast.

Kreacher is aware of this as much as he is. Since elves can't catch the highly contagious disease he's been run ragged between his normal duties and keeping his baby brother calm. He had to leave Regulus in the care of Atlas, just so he could get Sirius ready. Sage, let's just get this over with.

“Come, boy,” Orion snaps from the base of the stairs. Sirius has heard the man speak less than fifty times in his life. As per the norm, his father is disinterested in the extreme. “Your Mother awaits.”

Well, he thinks, that is also per the norm. There is only ever one thing on his father’s mind, and that is his Lady Wife. Gods willing it’s only an unhealthy obsession and not something more, ah, *engineered* by the interested parties.

“Of course.”

He straightens, shoulders rolling back and down, chin kept parallel to the ground, taking care the robe falls as it should. Just get this done.

His mother waits at the top of the stairs, leading to the floo. She’s resplendent, as usual, dark hair twisted in a complicated updo, black dress clinging to her body. She never bothers with jewels, and the grey of her eyes stands out dramatically against the venous-red of her lips.

Visually, the two adults make for a striking pair. Orion is objectively handsome, tall, and blessed with the phenotype resulting from generations of selective breeding. He’s nothing compared to her, not because of any physical flaw, but because of how without consequence he is.

“Lord Black will be arriving shortly,” Walburga hisses. “There is no time for your nonsense.”

She’s talking to Orion, but Sirius takes the calculated risk. “Apologies, Mother. I was caught admiring the robe.”

“Lackwits, both of you,” spits the Lady, fire and ice fighting in her eyes. She spins around and starts making her way downstairs, followed closely by her slavering servant. Pathetic.

Sirius is about to step onto the stairs when a wail and a crash blare from behind. His ears start ringing, even as static fills his brain. What—is Regulus—He spins around wildly, tensing,

hoping for—what—

Kreacher freezes. His eyes snap between Sirius, the Nursery and the two adults who have started to realise they are about to get even more delayed.

Three things happen at the same time. One: Regulus bursts through the door, leaning on Atlas, eyes unseeing, burning with fever. Two: Sirius starts moving towards his brother, resolve interlocking with every insane complex he had developed over the years. In less than a heartbeat, Sirius is frenzied enough to spit in the eye of the Shinigami if it would stand between him and his brother. Three: Orion Black and Walburga Black conclude their sons are undertaking some sort of a rebellion, and start climbing the stairs with icy fury.

“Siri,” babbles Regulus, walking blindly, using his magic and Atlas as a crutch. “Siri hurts.”

Sirius lunges for his brother, robes forgotten, intent on doing anything—everything—something—

Walburga hisses in a deathly even tone. “You have one second to come here, child. Neither of you will enjoy the consequences should you continue to try my patience.”

Sirius ignores the irrelevant noise and falls to his knees in front of his brother. What—Did something happen? Is Regulus—

Regulus appears to be perfectly hale and healthy, dragon pox aside. So how did he—Did Atlas break him out of their nursery? The dog is wary now, frozen still and eying the approaching threat. He knows his role is to guard and support Regulus, who only stands because of the death grip on the long fur.

A bit calmer, but just a bit, he can afford to think. Alright. Alright. What—How will they get through this fucking mess?

An invisible force wraps around him and launches him back and away from his brother. Sirius spent years training just for situations like these. He twists in the air, magic tingling on his skin but—he's held, immobile, floating in the air like a lump. A subvocal growl escapes Atlas; he's gearing up to a fight as well, balance distributed evenly, lips peeling back into a snarl.

What is happening—Ah. Walburga has her wand trained on Sirius, while Orion sends a bright green curse at Atlas—The killing curse? On—Regulus is *right there*, he could have—An inch to the left and he would have—

Ice stabs into his heart and spreads as Orion follows it up with a sickly orange curse that hits Regulus in the chest. He can't move and—he can only watch—

Atlas falls, dead, and Regulus screams and follows, slumping over the dog's body. Sirius—He—What—

Red washes over his vision and stays, mouth flooding with blood from the cut he bit into his cheek. Moving entirely on instincts made in his last life, Itachi's magic bends to his Shinobi roots. The magic keeping him still couldn't hope to stand up to a blood-mad Uchiha whose life is in danger. Who is being *tortured before his eyes.* Because she's an arrogant, bigoted bitch, Walburga wasn't expecting an attack. The crunch he hears when her back hits the wall is that much more satisfying. She's not dead yet, and more's the pity, but she will need a new spine if she plans to move again.

Itachi drops to the ground into a light crouch, feet falling into Catspaw by instinct. One target is eliminated. Now, the other one.

The witless, wretched *traitor* doesn't even know he's already dead, the fool. No, he spins around at the sound of his wife's scream, magic spiking. Is that—Is the worm trying to emit KI? To intimidate *Itachi?*

*"*You think you can match *me* in *killing intent*?" Itachi grins, opening up his heart and letting all the insane rage play. "Think again, traitor."

The force of Itachi's hatred makes Black double over, gasping. That is as much of an opening as Itachi needs. He rushes forward, magic-fast muscles swallowing the distance easily. This will be no clean, clinical attack. No, there is one way to handle fathers who torture their children. Who is *still* torturing their children, if Reg's pained screams are any indication.

Physical combat isn't something that wizards are familiar with. Child or not, it's not Sirius Black that's about to execute this poor excuse of a man, it's Uchiha Itachi. Uchiha Itachi has executed much less deserving family members without hesitation.

A blood-red spell flies, catching him in the arm. Irrelevant. The curse opens up a cut down his shoulder and bicep, but apart from the initial burst, no blood flows. Someone—probably Kreacher—made a barrier that stops the blood from exiting his body. Orion—too far gone to even think about elves—eyes the wound with some wariness. You think this is Itachi's magic? Please. Itachi's magic isn't meant for anything as pure as healing. *No, no*, let's see what Itachi's magic is for.

Now less than a meter away from the man, he jumps, swinging just a bit to the right—Perfect. His left arm catches Orion by the shoulder, as the right hand closes around his throat. He twists, arches his back, spins around, and contracts his body at the waist, both knees hitting Orion's ribcage with all the magic-enhanced strength he can produce. It's—a lot. Ribs snap—one—two—three—four. *CrunchCrunchCrunchCrunch*. He's pretty sure he felt at least one organ burst under his knees.

The weak little man falls, screaming, coughing. Good. Hopefully, the fragments of your ribs punctured your lungs. "If there is any justice in the world, you would be feeling blood rising in your lungs," he says. "Do you feel like you're drowning? You will soon enough. Do keep me updated, I'm just *dying* to know."

Regulus's screams stop. The vile man was angry enough to kill his eldest son but still had focus enough to continue torturing the younger. The younger who still lies on the corpse of their dog.

Having sufficiently de-fanged his enemies, he can afford a moment to think. He stands over the wheezing man, wondering—should he settle for watching him die? Is he merciful enough to leave it at that? His moral dilemma is neatly solved by Regulus. The boy is too delirious to understand exactly what has transpired, but he's damn well aware that Atlas is dead. The pitch of his screams turns from pain to grief.

“Well, now, father,” Itachi muses, struggling to speak English and not Chikyūgo. “I suppose it’s time for you to die. I might take your head to my Presentation, and stake it out in front of Lord Black’s gates as a trophy. Maybe throw it to the dogs, after. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

He places one small, bare foot on his father’s heaving chest, the man obviously struggling to breathe. He presses down gently, not enough to kill him, but enough to hurt. Animal, instinctive fear enters the hazy grey eyes, and his struggles increase.

“Is this how you wanted to spend your son’s birthday? Dying like a worm, choking on your own blood?”

“That. Is. Enough.” Comes from downstairs.

# Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The Lord

Lord Arcturus Black climbs the stairs, wand in hand, body illuminated with Family Magic.

Itachi tenses, a hurricane of lunatic rage taking exception at being thwarted. At the same time, his magic resonates with the Lord's. Compartmentalise, come on. It's been a few years since you had to step back from a kill, but that, at least, is a skill you don't lose. His breaths grow short, as he pants through the impotent fury, the physical need to finish what he started. It is his *right*—

With slow, painful movements he jerks his foot off the the dying man's chest and steeps back. He inhales a long, shuddering breath and sets his jaw. Come on, you know better than this. You may be as monstrous as you please, as long as you show yourself to be safely leashed. Part by part, his personality is locked up, until little remains but a mission-ready assassin.

Temporarily free from the shackles of emotion and humanity, he straightens, and looks calmly down at his target. "Saved by the grace of stronger men," he murmurs and bows to the approaching Lord. "Merry meet, Lord Black."

"Young Sirius, I presume?" Each word is crisp and pleasant to the ear, in contrast to the imposing weight of the Family magic. "Merry meet, indeed."

Itachi scans the newest opponent. Middle-aged. At the prime of his strength. Calm, collected, rational. Engage only in a suicide run. "Yes, Lord Black. I apologize for my tardiness. You see, I was about to execute your worthless excuse of a son. Should you be kind enough to withhold your judgment until I am finished, I would be in your debt."

An elegant brow rises, but Itachi's goading produces not a sliver of an expression. "Some context, perhaps."

"As you wish." Itachi bows again, matching his tone to the older man's. "My younger brother Regulus is ill—Dragon Pox. Tonight was the first time I was forced from his side and he grew alarmed. With the aid of his faithful companion, Atlas, they broke out of the nursery, and came to find me."

Lord Black flickers his eyes from the crumpled form of a boy, weeping over a motionless corpse of a dog. Not a single muscle changes from the blank, affable mask. Grey eyes remain clear and sphynxian, but the magic—shudders.

"Soon-to-be-late Orion Black saw fit to punish him for the audacity. He murdered Atlas, our barghest, and started torturing Regulus. His wife, in the meantime, immobilized and levitated me, presumably to force me to watch." His eyes cut to the unconscious figure on the ground, as his magic screams with outrage. The Lord will take his rightful kills from him, and—Never mind that. "I took exception to this betrayal and blasted her into the wall, dealing regrettably nonlethal injuries. Then I broke the traitor's ribs, liquified a handful of his organs, and was about to behead him and mount the head on a spike as a trophy."

Absently, he admires how polite his tone is. Battle-focus is good for something at least. His 's' sounds may have twisted slightly, but it added a debonair flair.

Lord Black looks at him for a long beat. "Elf, is this true?"

"Yes, great Lord." Most people wouldn't see anything amiss in the old elf. Itachi sees the newest trauma settle in the shadows in Kreacher's eyes and knows they will stay there for the rest of his life.

The Lord sighs and closes his eyes briefly. "Hecate wept, we don't have time for this. I'm sure you realise I cannot let you execute my son. He is, for my sins, my only heir."

“I’m sure I can make a compelling argument that I am the superior heir. For example—” He glares at the twitching, wheezing lump and looks—there. His magic twists—pushes—

Orion’s wand immolates. Instead of the explosion a la Rowle, the sorry piece of wood burns up from the inside, the core faintly glowing. If Itachi were a more poetic soul, he’d think the wand was as unhappy with its wielder as Itachi is. Since he’s Uchiha, he knows fire comes for all things, with enough application of force.

Finally, Arcturus’s eyes widen, serene composure broken. The taboo against destroying wands is not without its uses. One would think the taboo against torturing seven-year-olds and killing their dogs would be stronger still, but apparently not.

“Point made, child.” The Black Lord considers Itachi for a moment, obviously weighing up his mental stability. In the end, he settles for raising a wordless shield around himself. Itachi bares his teeth at him, earning a barely suppressed shudder. “With that said, you haven’t the years. I am not as young as I was, and I’m due an heir to sit the Wizengamot meetings. You might be a vicious little murderer-to-be but nine-year-olds can’t sit in the Wizengamot.”

“It seems we’ve arrived at an impasse,” Itachi muses, aware of just how unnerving he coming across. He has inched his way around the room so that he stands between his inconsolable brother weeping over their fucking dog’s corpse.

“Is this the conversation you want to have with the Lord of your family,” says Arcturus in a very reasonable tone. “Even if you were Merlin himself, the Family Magic would crush you where you stand.”

“But you want me at the Presentation, do you not?” The Lord startles, possibly at the audacity. “You can try binding me with magic, which I will break sooner than you think. You can try holding my brother’s well-being over my head, and we will run for the hills sooner than you can think to disinherit us. The only way both of us get what we want is by being adults about this.”

The Lord—relaxes. Why now, Itachi doesn’t know. It’s entirely possible that Blacks can only process aggression, and that this is a language Lord Black is comfortable with. “How my son fathered someone like you, I do not know. I do want you at your Presentation and, while I

need my heir alive, I shudder to think what would happen to the family if Walburga was holding the reins of the main line."

"In that, we are in firm agreement." All this talk, all this time spent, and Itachi still won't get to comfort Regulus. Even if he manages to play this perfectly, he will still have to go to a *party,* and leave Regulus alone, sick and grieved and in pain.

"Well, then. I want you to clean the blood off yourself. I want you to be charming and beautiful and perfect. I want you to avoid any mention of beheading where our guests can hear. What are your demands? I can't offer you my son's life, you understand? It's nothing personal."

A huff of laughter escapes Itach's throat at the last quip. Nothing personal, indeed. "I want Kreacher to be under my control, and no-one else's, not even yours. I want rooms where neither of those two worms can enter. And I want free access to books."

"Reasonable," Arcturus says. "Tell you what, I'll throw in a vault under your control as a show of good faith. If you plan on living here—which I hardly recommend—you need independent finances. Otherwise, I shudder to think what madness will descend upon this abode."

"You are most gracious, Lord Black," says Itachi. "I grieve for your position; it cannot be pleasant to be burdened with such an Heir. Are you certain there is no other option? Aunt Lucretia, perhaps?"

Lord Arcturus's lips twitch. "Are you stalling in hopes your father might yet expire? I cast a stasis charm on him already. Are we in agreement, child? Remember, I am the Lord of your House. Family magic will hold you to your word."

"We do," Itachi allows. It was a foolish hope anyway.

The vow burrows under his skin with a soundless boom. He throws a dry look at his patriarch, who looks all too amused. Wait—Kreacher—

He can't feel the bond, but he can damn well feel the body that slams into him. Dear, loyal Kreacher buries his head into his shoulder, for a long moment, visibly gathering himself, before craning back to look at his shoulder.

"I'm fine, Kreacher, thank you. Can you please—" Amaterasu have mercy. "—Preserve Atlas until I can arrange something suitably grand? And check to see if my brother has suffered any lasting damage?"

"Little Master is not fine," croaks Kreacher. "Little Master is wounded. I will sit on you, see if I won't. Let old Kreacher heal your wounds and then you can go be the perfect Heir of the Great House."

"Alright." He lets himself be manhandled this way and that, until Kreacher is convinced all his cuts and bruises are healed, and there is not a scratch left on him.

"I will give you three minutes to say goodbye to your brother, child. After that, I won't even have to punish you, the magic will do so in my stead." Arcturus doesn't wait for his reply, busy tending to his fallen son and daughter-in-law. Pity. Itachi hoped he'd let them rot.

This is not a bluff he dares to call. One step, two, he's crouching down next to Regulus. He picks up the near-comatose boy, still awake only by the force of pain and fear. "My star, my brightest light," he whispers, inhaling the familiar scent. "I am here now. I have chased the traitors away, and they won't harm you if they want to keep their skin." Sixty seconds. "Dear heart, listen to me. Kreacher will take you to your room. I have to go away briefly. I have promised, little star, and magic will not let me betray that promise." One hundred seconds. It's a mystery if his brother is capable of hearing much less comprehending him, but it's all the time for explanations he can spare. "Sleep, dearest. I will be back with you soon."

He stands, hands the insatiate boy to Kreacher, and sprints down the stairs.

"Acceptable." Lord Black runs his eyes down his blood-stained robes, cut in several places. Fancy fabrics are well and good, but magical blood is magical blood. The pristine robes are ruined.

“A simple repair charm will not do,” he says. “And there is simply no time for anything more elaborate. Alright.”

He passes his wand in circles above Itachi’s head, chanting a long, melodic spell.  Layers of magic settle on top of him, locking into one another, forming a complex working. This illusion will not break easily. A necklace materialises around his throat; a thin silver chain with an ouroboros pendant.

“The illusion will hold for seven hours. I will have you back here in one, Lady permitting. A select few will see through it, but they will assume you to be the victim, not the perpetrator.”

Itachi’s lips twitch. “How scandalous.”

“You seem to be the scandalous sort of child, Sirius.”

“It would appear so, wouldn’t it?”

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The floo deposits them into an empty chamber but for a single woman. The room is magnificent, with high ceilings, and improbable marble arches. The woman glides towards them with the air of a lady that is too well-bred to stomp, however much she would want to. He can’t place her age. Her blonde hair is bound up in a sweeping bun, and her dark—almost black—eyes stand out in a family of pale-eyed Blacks. The imperious expression, the supremely confident posture, the frenzied magic buzzing around her—she can only be his Grandmother, Lady Melania Black nee Macmillan.

“Merry meet, Lady Black,” greets Itachi, with a perfectly meaningless smile

“Merry meet, Sirius.”The Lady drags a critical eye over Itachi’s body, pausing to consider the silver chain. The inquisitive glance she sends to her husband is met with a blank expression

of a man trying, and failing, to suppress an ocean's worth of exasperation behind a proper Pureblood mask.

"I dare not ask," declares the Lady. "Now, quickly. We're cutting it close, as is. Ten minutes more, and I would have sent for you."

"Trust me, my love," says Arcturus, "as bad as this looks, the truth is much worse. We will have headaches for years."

"Excellent," says the Lady, systematically arranging her features into a perfect, welcoming expression. It's a fascinating if disconcerting process to watch in another. Itachi did the same, once. He spent hours practising different expressions, studying the effect of flexing this muscle or that, to achieve the sought-after effect. The Lady is better at it than he is; her smile slots in place with only a moment or two of the inhuman in-between stage. "I do not care in the slightest. Do you have a prepared explanation for Orion and Walburga's absence?"

"Not at all." Arcturus starts moving towards the hallway leading to, presumably, the ballroom. "Any suggestions?"

"They remained at home to care for their son?"

Not at all willing to expand too much mental energy on this farce, Itachi doesn't censor the instinctive sneer. It doesn't go unnoticed. Lady Black's expression remains flawless, but her steps falter, a misstep unnoticeable for anyone who wasn't looking closely to begin with.

Lord Black tuts, considerably more willing to be amused than his lady wife. "Now, now, little murderer. It's the best explanation we have."

True. "I do not object in theory." Not *really*. "It is just an outrageous lie. Those people wouldn't be moved an inch to help a child, their own absolutely included."

“It need not be true, child,” says Lady Black after a beat of silence. “Or even appear likely. It just has to be plausible enough to allow our guests to be polite about it.”

Itachi inclines his head just so, letting the curls obscure his face slightly.  “As you wish.”

“I begin to understand the shape of the events,” says the Lady, not in the least amused.

“Indeed,” hums Arcturus, still infernally amused. “The boy grows on you. When you get over the bloodlust and the ridiculous maturity, he’s not without charm.”

The Lady hums, before exhaling a long, bracing breath. “We all need that to be true”

The long walk through corridor is finally near its end, and behind the giant arch, a ballroom full of people—hundreds and hundreds of people—are gathered, waiting for the ridiculous spectacle to begin.

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# Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The Presentaton

The buzz in his ears stubbornly persists. His walk is improper, he is aware, but not as much as everything else is. The onlookers might not *know* what they are looking at, but they can certainly feel it. Itachi doesn't glide the expected Pureblood glade. He prowls, most of his weight on the balls of his feet, always balanced, always ready. His muscles are loose, neck arched in the most arrogant angle he, the firstborn Heir of the Uchiha Clan, can muster. It's a very primitive performance, honestly. Mikoto would have sliced him into ribbons if she saw him put on such a crude display.

He can't help it. It's not that these Wizarding Nobles aren't fascinating, because they are. A spectacular variety of ways humans—and the discrete species of creatures—can achieve beauty is on show. Gorgeous specimens of all shapes and sizes glide over the glittering ballroom floor, chatting lightly, and pretending they're not all posturing.

He should be cataloguing every one of them. Every man, woman and child present could one day be an enemy, an ally and everything in between. Alas, this is a very 'Sirius' event, and he is decidedly 'Itachi' right now. His sense of self isn't fractured as such, but it is binary. If he's a boy living in a magical house with his brother and their elven parent, he is Sirius. If he is battling a maddened traitor to the death, he's Itachi. It's probably not the most healthy way to organise his psyche, but it works. Now if he could only stop trying to activate the Sharingan like a twit.

His gait might be wrong, and his blood might be up, but a mission is a mission. He focuses as best he can, and smiles, bows, greets, and generally goes through the motions of charming the adults. Arcturus and Melania are right beside him, bracketing and directing his movements informed by whatever set of metrics and goals they have set for the evening.

The adults like him for the most part; this is not especially hard to accomplish. They are predisposed to like him—or at least pretend to. As Melania had said, the distinction between truth and polite fiction is entirely trivial in these types of events.

He's quickly steered away from various foreign dignitaries, after nominal greetings. It's clear they are not really interested in any further communication until he's of age, and they're here for tradition's sake. At most, they want to suss out his betrothal status.

Lord and Lady Black are nowhere near as willing to let Itachi off the hook when it's time to meet the native Purebloods. Every single House from the Sacred Twenty-Eight has sent a representative: a Lord, a Heir or, usually, both. Add to that a slew of Noble Houses—without the 'ancient' part—and then a gaggle of Vassal Houses to the House of Black and Itachi hasn't a clue how Lord Black planned to have him back in an hour. It will be at least four.

It's a shame he's in battle-focus, but at least it makes him very, very sensitive to the predators in the room. There is no rhyme or reason to it, the Lord of House Flint is a perfectly harmless man, focused on Herbology and little else. In contrast, the Lovegood heiress could cut steel with how sharp her eyes are. She sees through his disguise without effort, and it doesn't give her any pause. It's clear the little lady doesn't have any use for him, and her dismissal is prompt and thorough. Her parents are much less interesting, and they try to inexpertly cover for their daughter's faux-pas, missing both her exasperated eye-roll and how Itachi's eyes glaze over in boredom.

The Longbottom Matriarch, Lady Augusta Longbottom is another dangerous woman. The Lady despises him, both personally and as a member of the Black family. Itachi wonders a little about that. The Longbottoms have intermarried with the Blacks fairly recently. That could, upon reflection, be the cause of the strife.

Her son is impressive, it has to be said. Irritatingly tall for his fifteen years, Franklin Longbottom, Heir to Ancient and Noble House Longbottom, cuts a striking figure, well-proportioned, with features even odder to Itachi's eye than those of the Blacks. With a square jaw, full lips and a prominent brow, he is closer to an Inuzuka than the spindly Pureblood archetype he has come to expect. He is also horrendously out of his depth in a gathering like this. His sincerity is painfully obvious, as is his fundamentally kind nature.

"Merry meet, Heir Black," booms the cheerful giant, bowing at an appropriate depth to an heir above his station.

“Merry meet, Lady Longbottom, Heir Longbottom,” Itachi says, bowing. House of Black is technically the social superior, but not by so much. He is, after all, but a measly heir talking to a Matriarch and her Heir.

Franklin Longbottom breaks the silence, voice thrumming with enthusiasm. “A marvellous Castle, I have to say. I’ve never seen the like. Oh, there is Hogwarts, of course, but the old girl is nowhere as grand.”

Itachi blinks for a moment, trying to parse through the words, looking for an insult, a barb, *something*. He cycles through the words again. Nothing. “Thank you, Heir Longbottom,” he replies, a bit off-balance at this outpouring of apparent sincerity. “I have to agree with you. I’ve never had the opportunity to visit Castle Black either, so I am as astounded as you are.”

“Ah, yes,” replies Franklin, lowering his voice some, in what is possibly an attempt at discretion. Since the boy stands out in this shark-infested place like a beacon of hearty goodness, Itachi can safely say he is far from successful. “I’ve heard word of your ill-health. My condolences. And please, call me Franklin, or even better—Frank.”

Itachi throws a helpless look at the boy’s mother. She meets his eyes and, for a long heartbeat, they reach a point of understanding.

“Thank you for your kind words, Franklin,” he says carefully. “My first years were—unpleasant, yes, but ever since my brother came into my life, I have to say it had turned around completely.”

A wide smile breaks onto Franklin’s face, and his dark brown eyes twinkle with joy. “Salutations. I have not heard a word about a second son. You are beyond fortunate! “

Itachi sends a chilly glance at his grandparents who are too well-trained to give any sort of outward reaction. He knows his point is made, though.

“My Regulus is the greatest thing to happen to House of Black since its conception,” he says pointedly. “Your words are very wise, Frank. I am, as you say, beyond fortunate.”

After a moment’s pause, he decides to go the ‘fuck-it’ route. “In fact, while Regulus’s Presentation will likely not be as grand a production as this, I would still invite the House of Longbottom to attend, if it pleases you. Regulus is the finest boy in Britain, and I’m sure you will come to appreciate him as I do.”

He feels more than he hears, Lord Black sigh from behind him. Lady Longbottom, however, swapped some of her derision for calculating suspicion. A step in the right direction, in all likelihood.

Frank beams, flashing his teeth in a gutless smile. “It would be my pleasure. And, of course, you will be attending Hogwarts in two years, will you not? We might be housemates.”

Itachi blinks again. Everyone knows the Blacks are sorted to Slytherin? He’s playing them, he thinks, eyes narrowing. There is something about him, something about his wide, earnest face that makes him think the boy is laughing at the entire world.

“You are in Gryffindor, are you not?”

“Indeed I am,” replies Frank happily. “A fourth-year Gryffindor.”

“I—see.”

He is most definitely playing them. There is simply no other explanation. Even if they set aside the hereditary dimension of the sorting, infamous Sirius Black can’t be anything but a Slytherin. The fact is, even *Itachi* doesn’t doubt he will end up a Slytherin one way or the other.

Mercy comes from an unexpected source, meaning Lady Longbottom. “Everything is possible, I suppose. And should you end up in Gryffindor, I’m sure Frank will be happy to be

of assistance."

"Oh, yes," chirps the giant. "I am always delighted to help my friends. And we are friends, are we not Heir Black?"

"Of course," says Itachi, getting the not at all subtle hint. "And please, call me Sirius."

"Smashing," beams Frank. "Well, then, Sirius, I have monopolised your time far too much already. I'm sure your guardians are eager to show you off some more. Merry part! Toodles!"

Itachi barely has the time to nod back and babble appropriate phrases before Frank is dragging away his mother, stomping through the crowds like a well-meaning elephant. Itachi looks at their retreating figures. Did he say *toodles*? To *Lord and Lady Black*?

"That boy, I swear," mutters Lady Black. "You've done well to chisel through Augusta's preconceptions. But that son of hers is trouble."

"It has to be a play," says Itachi, still slightly dazed. "He has to be playing everyone, his mother included. Nobody is—that."

"Possibly," says Lady Black, lips pressed in a tight, disapproving line. "He's magically gifted, the only child of an old, powerful House, rumoured to be the direct descendant of Gryffindor. Perfect grades, wide social circle, and yet everyone who meets him goes away uneasy."

"I can see why."

"Off we go," interjects Lord Black. "I second my wife's words. You've done well with the House Longbottom. They will never be our allies, not while Augusta lives, but cordial neutrality is not beyond hope. Keep it up and I will include a vault for Regulus."

Itachi does so appreciate direct bribery. “I will do my best, Lord Black.”

“Do so.”

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Slightly more relaxed—and, thus, less eager to sink his teeth into the jugular of every approaching adult—he breezes through the perfunctory chitchat with the Vassal houses.

“Be on your guard, little murderer,” murmurs Lord Black, as they’re approaching the final throng of Nobles. “These are the people who will make or break this evening. They are our allies, and allies are hardly motivated to tolerate weakness.”

And there goes whatever calm he managed to scrounge. He slams into mission-focus, back straightening and face freezing into a blank mask—if unhinged around the eyes.

“Very good. Not what I would recommend for polite society, but it will serve you well in this company.”

Every man—a Lord of their House—is a fine example of a predator. Beauty is entirely the norm with these people, but their magic is nowhere near as leashed as the rest of the attendees’. Itachi does his best to scan for weaknesses, without being obvious about it; it’s times like these a Sharingan would be convenient.

“My friends,” says Lord Black, voice pitched to carry slightly. A ripple of energy—magic—hums around them. Some sort of privacy ward, perhaps? He hardly thinks Lord Black throws around words like ‘friend’ within earshot of others. “May I present Sirius Black, heir to the House of Black.”

Itachi bows low, every instinct screaming to not show his neck to a group of people so tangibly dangerous. “Merry meet, My Lords.” There is an art to pitching your voice into a smooth and slightly seductive cadence without losing the cold and arrogant bite. Itachi once

had it down perfectly, but hadn't thought to practice it much in this life. His results now are close, but amateurish.

"Sirius, meet our allies." To avoid any notion of hierarchy in the group, Lord Black starts naming the Lords from closest to farthest. Clever. "Lord Abraxas Malfoy and his Heir Lucius." Bow—nod. "Lord Edmund Nott and his Heir Dorian." Bow—nod. "Lord Evan Rosier." Bow—nod. "Marvolo Riddle."

That last name—namely, the lack of title—could have perhaps given him pause, if the person in question wasn't without a doubt the most dangerous person in the castle. Itachi's bow is perhaps a hair lower than it should be, considering the presumed disparity of their social standing. He stands by it. Itachi is many things, but Shinobi is high up there. A brain-dead Genin wouldn't disrespect a man who could be Orochimaru's soul twin.

A small, amused smile plays around the snake-shark's mouth, and the man's nod is as regal as you could hope.

Lord Black says something, that Itachi should likely be listening to. However, Itachi is not, in fact, a fool. He will not be the first one to break eye contact with this Marvolo Riddle.

For all that he couldn't hope to remember one single identifying trait of the other Pureblood Lords he had just been introduced to, he has no trouble at all with committing this one to memory. The man is noticeably tall, even in this company. Beautiful, of course, but with an original twist. All British Purebloods share facial features to an extent, sharp chins, high cheekbones, straight, narrow noses. Riddle has electric, sunken blue eyes, outlined by faint dark circles. His cheekbones are even more prominent than his companions', jutting out from his face in a severe line. There is something—unnerving about how his face comes together. Every feature individually is as perfect as you can hope, but he's nowhere as angelic as he should be when observed as a whole. Too symmetrical, perhaps? Itachi once had the same problem. Sirius Black has a pretty but ultimately ordinary face. Itachi's was symmetrical to a fault, which tended to disturb people.

Then there is the matter of his magic. Dark, thick, and violent, would be the first few epithets that come to mind. A warrior?

Riddle is observing him right back, although his gaze has an air of bored indulgence. Itachi can pinpoint the exact moment when he finished his inspection of Itachi's face, and took in the ripped and bloody clothing. A spark of curiosity lights his eyes up, and he starts observing in interest.

Itachi forces his body not to tense. There's no need to be rude about this. He visibly relaxes, instead, distributing his weight better, and mimicking Orochimaru as best he can. A languid tilt of the chin, slightly lidded eyes, hint of a twist to the lips that could hint at a smirk or a sneer in equal measure. Shoulders thrown back, spine seemingly relaxed. All in all, the perfect mimicry of arrogance, while optimally poised to attack—or run.

A small part of his mind notices that the Lords and their Heirs are quiet, apparently content to let this play out. Remember that; that's important. The much larger, survival-oriented, part of his mind is focused on living through this. The goal is not to impress the man; Black or not, Itachi doubts any child is capable of such. It's about keeping his own, without offering disrespect. A complicated little game, all said, made more complicated by the fact he came into this unprepared and compromised. Why Lord Black hadn't briefed him on this, he will never know.

His attempt at posturing is met with—something. Interest, if he's optimistic. Condescending amusement is closer to the mark. He'll take it, if so.

"Blessings on the day of your birth, Heir Black."

His voice suits a Pureblood voice with a twist. A raspy baritone, half a note off from the urbane drawl he's come to expect.

"Tell me," Marvolo Riddle continues. "Why aren't Orion and Walburga present? I dearly hoped to see them."

Itachi doesn't let himself hesitate. A man like this can't possibly have any affection for a weak snivelling worm like Orion Black. Walburga, perhaps, but he doubts it. It's a test. It has to be.

“I’m afraid my parents—” He allows a sneer to twist his lips, if briefly. “—Couldn’t be here.” Careful now. Something in the back of his mind warns that it would be very unwise to tell an outright lie to this man. “They are indisposed. I am certain Lord Black would be willing to inform them of your wishes.”

Blue eyes sharpen with an emotion he couldn’t hope to decipher. “Interesting. No matter, I’m sure they will be happy to explain the—particulars—when I see them next.”

Is this wise? Absolutely not. Does he dare? Apparently so. “I’m sure you will find the conversation enjoyable,” he says, a trickle of cynical amusement sneaking into his tone.

“Undoubtedly.” With the last remark, Lord(?) Riddle audibly dismisses him, and Itachi can breathe properly once more. Izanami wept, this man. Now if he could just—

Lord Black places a light hand on his shoulder; never a good idea when dealing with a Shinobi as keyed in as he is. Itachi tenses, magic rising around him and snapping out in a cutting motion. He has it under control in less than a heartbeat but it’s too late. Every single Lord and Heir in the group has focused on him, expression frozen.

Lord Riddle smirks and shakes his head in mock disapproval. “Now, now,” he says in what likely passes for saccharine sweet, for him. “This is a celebration, is it not? There is no need for such things.”

Itachi breathes in as subtly as he can and forces his body to appear relaxed. “My sincere apologies.” His tone could be lighter, but it’s not as strangled as it wants to be, so he counts it as a win. “A moment of distraction, nothing more.”

The hand on his shoulder twitches, before relaxing. “It’s getting late, Sirius. It’s time to leave.”

“Yes, Lord Black.” Finally. Damn, but he wants to be out of the jaws of these reptiles, and home with Regulus and Kreacher. “I regret not having a chance for a more substantial conversation, my Lords. Unfortunately, nine-year-olds aren’t blessed with flexible bedtimes. Merry Part.”

He tries to avoid the stares from the Lords, Lord Riddle most of all, and covers as best he can with a low bow. Body armour. A nice thick magic-resistant band around his throat is going to be a must if he is to continue showing his scrawny little neck to these people.

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“You have dangerous friends, Lord Black,” he can’t help but say, a few minutes later. They’ve managed to tear themselves out of the crowd, only by the grace of the fact that most of the people there don’t care about Sirius Black past the introductions.

Lord Black’s mask slips for a moment, which is evidence enough of how rattled he is. “I admit, I wasn’t expecting you to catch anyone’s interest. I have, as it happens, underestimated you, grandson.”

Instead of the floo-chamber, he hustles them up a dizzying amount of stairs and half-hidden hallways, until they reach a door. The unassuming design of the door is, as expected, a misdirection because it leads into a beautiful study built, unlike the rest of the Castle, for comfort.

“It seems I have to get involved more than I thought. A conversation, I think, honest, or as honest as you can manage.”

Itachi points to an armchair. “May I?”

“Please.”

Lord Black melts into a chair and summons himself a glass of something alcoholic.

“What, exactly, did you want to discuss, Lord Black,” Itachi prompts when it’s clear that Grandfather is lost in thought.

“What, indeed?” Lord Black takes a bracing sip of his drink and lets out a sigh. “I’d start with a compliment. I’ve heard rumours of your intelligence and maturity. They were if anything too modest. I will take you and Regulus to Gringotts as soon as possible, to set up two independent vaults.”

Itachi inclines his head. “Thank you, my Lord.”

A disturbed expression crosses over Lord Black’s features before it melts into one of weariness. “Merlin, child, what did they do to you?” It’s clear the Lord regrets the words immediately, so Itachi does the polite thing and pretends he hasn’t heard.

After half a beat, Lord Black rallies. “Moving on, a warning: You’ve good instincts, and you’ve pinpointed the most dangerous man in the room. Tom Marvolo Riddle is a man I dare not discuss, not even here, behind the strongest wards in the Castle. He is lethal, child, and you’ve caught his interest. There is an—agreement—that children will be left alone until the age of majority. Alas, both sides are known to bend the rules if it suits them.”

Itachi blinks and tilts his head. “I am not sure I understand. Are you worried that man—Lord Riddle—will try to recruit me?”

A worried frown furrows the older man’s brow. “I don’t know, child. But you’ve shown yourself to be a prize that any leader will want to acquire.”

What an interesting development. Ultimately meaningless, but interesting.

“You don’t need to worry, Lord Black,” says Itachi. “I am not prone to impulse decisions. I will not be seduced to any side easily.” Not even yours, hangs unsaid in the air.

“I suppose that’s the best we can hope for,” Lord Black says half under his breath, before changing track. “Regarding your living arrangements; I am not convinced staying under Orion and Walburga’s roof is a wise choice. To speak candidly, your life has just grown even

more important. After tonight, I am not the only one who will be displeased should something happen to you, I'm afraid."

Itachi shrugs. "I have Kreacher. I have my magic. As long as you make it known I'm not to be harmed, I'm sure Orion and Walburga will stay in line. They're nothing if not slavishly devoted to the will of Lord Black."

Lord Black blinks, unnerved once more. "As you wish. Expect missives, child. In the absence of sane adults in your life, it falls to me to make sure you're not completely unprepared."

"I welcome any wisdom you see fit to share." Not even untrue.

"What a time to be alive." Lord Black seems to be talking to himself, which is either a worrying sign that the man is taking this more seriously than he'd expect, or a calculated approach to put Itachi at ease. "Things were nowhere near as exciting when I was young, and we had Gellert Grindelwald about."

There's nothing for him to say, so he remains quiet.

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# Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The funeral

He doesn't floo back; he's not a complete fool. He calls for Kreacher, who knows well how to play the game. Under the watchful eye of Lord Black, the elf is almost invisible. He doesn't speak, doesn't move unless he has to. He might as well be the part of the furniture, for all the attention he calls to himself.

The goodbyes are procedural at best, both himself and his Lord Black having better things to think about. He places a hand on Kreacher's back, the air twists, shifts, squeezes and they rematerialize in their room.

The room has gone through some changes. The two beds that used to be placed on opposite sides of the room are now pushed together. Regulus's potion shelf is shunted to the side, and any dog-related paraphernalia is gone. A twang of pain goes off in Sirius' mind. Not now. Regulus. Kreacher.

Kreacher sags, visibly wilting. "Thank the Goddess." His voice rasps even more when he's tired, or when he whispers. Sirius understands him only because of previous experience.

"How is Regulus?" His voice cracks. Now that the adrenaline is running out, and he's out of a live-or-die nightmare, dizziness and nausea make a swift and brutal takeover of his senses.

"Little Master sleeps," says Kreacher. "He's—he's—" After a moment's pause, the old elf digs up some reserve of energy. "He will be fine."

"Good, good." He hadn't eaten anything in a while. Surely there is nothing in him to throw up.

“I’m going to throw up,” he says. He’s so exhausted that even the prospect of puking over himself doesn’t summon any urgency.

“Oh, child,” sighs Kreacher, a world of hurt in his voice. A subtle wave of magic later, a basin appears right next to him.

“The good news is that the Presentation went well,” he says after Kreacher has cleaned him up and helped him change into his comfiest pyjamas. “Well enough that Lord Black will gift us two vaults under our control.”

Kreacher looks at him with big, sad eyes and doesn’t say anything.

“It is—it’s good news.”

“Yes,” agrees Kreacher.

“And—And I made some useful contacts for us. Grandfather was very pleased. Which is good.”

A warm leathery hand cards through his hair, and Kreacher squeezes next to him on the bed. “Yes.”

“And Regulus is—not fine yet, granted, but he will be soon enough.”

“Yes.”

Kreacher’s voice holds no recrimination; no anger, fury or frustration. Just oceans of sincere, serene pain.

“And—and—and Atlas is dead.” Is he—Is he crying? How odd. He hadn’t cried for years, discounting tears of blood which are a different thing entirely. He didn’t think he had any tears left in him.

“Oh, child.” Kreacher is crying too. “He lived a good life and died a noble death.”

“I could’ve—I should have done something.” Amaterasu, but he sounds young. “I didn’t—I didn’t think—”

“You know you are not to blame. Master—He—”

“He is not your master any more. Not ever. You are free—as free as you want to be. My family in truth.” The gasps and hiccups take away from the dignity of the message, but Kreacher already knows all this.

“Kreacher will remember in time. I have been Master Orion’s since the day he was born. That is a long time to learn.”

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“Atlas dead, Regulus tortured—for what?”

“You should sleep, child,” Kreacher says in lieu of answering, old enough to know conversational quicksand when he sees it. “For the morning is wiser than the evening.”

“That sounds better in Russian,” he murmurs but obeys.

“Yes.”

As a rule, Sirius tries not to compare Sasuke and Regulus. He especially doesn't want to compare their respective manifestations of ruined innocence. It's not even a good comparison. Itachi managed to destroy Sasuke's innocence and shatter his mind in one go, which complicated things.

He still sees hints of Sasuke in Regulus. Much like Sasuke, Reg had fallen into a deep sleep and didn't wake up for days, disregarding a few minutes every day or so. Like Sasuke, Reg wakes up after twelve days with shadows in his eyes that don't go anywhere.  He was a child, before, at least for a few hours every day. After being tortured by his father, having his dog killed, and watching his older brother sincerely attempted to murder said father only fragments of that child remain.

"I love you, Siri," are the first words he speaks, upon waking. "I'm so sorry for everything."

How Sirius manages to speak through the ice that spears his heart is anyone's guess. "If you believe nothing else I ever say, believe this: everything that happened, every single terrible detail, is the fault of Orion and Walburga Black. They're monsters. Even worse than that, they're traitors." Whoo, now, what's this? Some Konohan propaganda peeking through. Remember this; this is important.

"Yeah, " whispers the old man wearing his little's brother body. When he finally meets his eyes, they are clear, cold and merciless. "Would you have killed him?"

"Yes," Sirius replies, without pause or shame. "If Grandfather hadn't stopped me, I'd have broken what was left of his body watched him die in agony."

Regulus sighs again. "Yeah." After a beat, he sags back into his pillows, a too-wise, too-young, too-old human being pushed close to the breaking point.

“I think I hate violence,” says Regulus out of the blue, standing over the freshly dug grave. “I think I’m afraid of it. More afraid than I am of Mother and Father.”

Regulus hasn’t spoken more than ten words since he woke up seven days ago. Sirius feared his brother would remain mute for months to come.

“I understand,” he replies after a beat.

“You don’t, though.”

The piercing insight nudges something painful in him; some wound that never closed for good. “I—I don’t know.” Not the best answer, but it’s the only one he’s got.

Regulus hums, an oddly hollow tone, eyes still trained at the disturbed soil. “It’s okay. It’s brave to fight. You’ve always been the brave one.”

“I don’t think that’s true. I think I’m just—I’ve learned wrong things, and learned them too well. Violence is often the first solution I think of. I don’t think that’s brave.” His thoughts are odd, choppy things, beginnings of a concept here, a rejoinder there. It’s hard to force them into anything with sense. “I think it’s braver not to fight; not to kill. Smarter too.”

They’re quiet for an undetermined length of time. Kreacher’s magic keeps them warm and out of sight. It’s been almost a month since his Presentation, and they have managed to avoid so much as a glimpse of either adult. Arcturus sends bi-weekly letters, delivered by Finn, his personal elf. So far, nobody suggested any outings to Gringotts; not until Regulus regains some strength.

“I’m glad, though.” Regulus’s voice is raspy and unused, but the boy soldiers on. “I am glad you can fight. That’s—there’s a word for that. When you say you don’t like something, but like it when it benefits you.”

“Hypocrite, is the word,” says Itachi. “I don’t think it applies. I don’t know. That topic is—difficult. For me.”

“Yeah.” If this is how disturbing it is to hear cynicism out of a seven-year-old, how grotesque had it been when Itachi was three?

Fed up with this pointless tragedy, he wraps an arm around Regulus and yanks him into a half-hug. He won’t tear him away from grieving, because he doesn’t have the right, but he will damn well provide some support. “I’m sorry I can’t help you with this.”

“Likewise.”

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# Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Bouncing back.

Regulus bounces back, eventually. He never shrieks with laughter, never wants to play with conjurations and shuts down into an eerie little automaton if dogs are so much as mentioned, but he recovers. This brings them to their first 'outing' as a family, discounting the burial. The two Black children are going to Gringotts.

New, subdued Regulus is thrilled to go, which settles some of Sirius' worries. Unlike him, Regulus never stepped foot outside of their house and gardens. If things were different, he'd have proffered a long, monitored acclimatisation period. A walk or two, to start. Perhaps a stroll through Muggle London, where Sirius doesn't have to worry about security so much. Unfortunately, the Gringotts mission has to be done and has to be done fast. Kreacher can steal food and such from the house, but it's hardly a permanent solution.

Then again, Lord Black is their main point of safety and he's nowhere near as reliable as he'd like. Yes, he expressed a willingness to keep Sirius alive but didn't extend that to Regulus outright. He *thinks* it's implied, but leaving such things subtextual makes his heart race and ears ring.

"Are you fretting, Siri?"

"Terribly." He sighs and sends Reg a tense smile. "Lord Black will love you, I am certain of it, and Lady Black is a Macmillan by birth. They're a soft bunch, from what I'd gathered. I just—"

"I know." His little brother pats him on the back, the adult gesture for once coming across as more adorable than disturbing. "It will be fine. We will both behave like perfect Pureblood princes and get two vaults in return. Easy."

Easy, he says. “As you say, little star.”

---

The introductions go by without a hitch, which lets Sirius shed about five per cent of his hysterical paranoia. Regulus is a darling, of course. He’s honed his acting into an efficient weapon, and he plays his role perfectly—a mix between a baby-eyed fawn and a snooty, entitled aristocrat.

Lady Black buys it wholesale, while Lord Black is not fooled for so much as a heartbeat. Since Sirius watches the man like a hawk, he notices the cloud of grief that darkens his features when he looks at Regulus. Sirius can sympathise. His brother has learned to manipulate adults so well, and it still wasn’t enough to save him from torture and trauma.

“You two will do House Black proud,” Lord Black murmurs in the end, half a prayer, half a command.

As far as Sirius is concerned, Lord Black is too late to have any say in what they do with the House of Black, once they have it. He doesn’t resent the man specifically, but he hardly owes him anything.

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The goblins are an improbable species, he concludes after having a moment to observe them. Much like house-elves, they’re more akin to Summoning animals, than any mundane or even magical species. Considering both are fae, this is not at all surprising.

Not that Sirius found any concrete intel on Fae. For all that this world has a much more open approach to disseminating knowledge, the wishy-washy nature of the texts is ridiculous. The blatant propaganda is easy enough to spot and ignore, but that still leaves him with next to no information about the species that *controls the economy.* He doesn’t even know if they’re Seelie or Unseelie. Come to think of it, the same is true for the house-elves. Izanami have mercy.

He can only thank the Heavens that he isn't all that curious by nature. Practical skills are one thing, and he sincerely admires many crafts and disciplines, but he doesn't feel the urge to *understand.* Reg does, the poor dear, and Sirius knows it's going to drive him batty at some point.

The account manager of House Black, a goblin named Ugnok, spirits Lord and Lady Black away for a private meeting first, leaving Sirius and Regulus in a cosy little waiting room for the time being. They both use the time to gawk, in Itachi's case and relax, in Reg's. It's a big difference from their house, after all, and Reg is probably experiencing a little shock.

Finally, several long hours later, Lord and Lady Black step outside of the office and the two brothers stand from the bench and bow politely.

"Ugnok will see you now. First together, and then separately." Sirius doesn't think Lord Black is *angry,* but he is exasperated. It's clear he looks down on the goblins, which to Sirius seems to be an amusingly self-defeating prejudice.

"Merry part," says Sirius, closely echoed by Regulus.

"Kreacher will bring you to us when you are finished. Merry part."

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The door opens automatically; not by magic, interestingly. A mechanism? Some sort of weight sensors, perhaps?

Without any literature on the Goblin culture, he settles for a simple "Merry meet," and a short bow of indeterminate depth.

The Goblin sitting at the desk is entirely inscrutable; not that he'd be able to read their expressions either way what with their alien physiology. "Merry meet, Heir Black, Mr. Black. I was not expecting you for years yet."

Should he trust Ugnok's discretion? Is he in any way incentivised to keep their situation a secret? Should he engineer some incentives to be safe? What if—No. Stop this. Focus.

"Our parents have proven themselves to be problematic. Grandfather thought it wise to ensure a measure of fiscal independence."

The Goblin hums and reaches for a piece of parchment; one of many waiting for him on the desk. "This request is neither simple nor quick. Lord Black employs several law firms, I understand. After finishing the initial paperwork today, you will come back for several meetings with a solicitor and a bank representative. After that, Gringotts would recommend you have a barrister argue your case before the Wizgamont."

Itachi thinks about this for a moment. He hadn't given much thought about the legal side of things. In Konoha, age rarely played much of a role in legal dealings.

"Hypothetically," he says, "what would stop us from stashing several bags of Galleons of an arbitrary size in appropriately discrete locations?"

"That is an interesting question," rumbles Ugnok. "The money wouldn't be yours, for one. Minors aren't legally permitted to own property or monies. Exceptions are made for things like schooling, informally referred to as Hogwarts vaults, and of course a wide variety of vaults set aside for a particular purpose—dowries, bride prices, weddings, funerals and so forth."

An interesting bit of trivia, and not one that holds much sway. From what he's read between the lines, Purebloods do pretty much whatever they want, short of committing murder in front of other, antagonistic aristocrats whose testimony won't be thrown out of court. If the only obstacle to his solution is a convoluted legal theory of ownership, he's hardly going to lose sleep over it.

"More important to you, perhaps, is the fact that paying with Galleons won't take you very far. For the sake of argument, let's say, that Orion Black spreads the word that you're paying with stolen funds. Orion Black is the Heir to the Ancient and Noble House of Black. On his word, you will turned away from all but the black market dealers."

Now that is good thinking.

“But having our vaults would somehow allow us to circumnavigate this problem?”

“It will be a guarantee that the gold is, indeed, your legal property,” says Ugnok. He rummages through a drawer briefly and takes out a little booklet. “Gold rarely changes hands directly, especially between members of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. This is a chequebook Gringotts would issue in such cases, locked to your magical signature. It would guarantee that the transaction is legal, as it would go via Gringotts, from one vault to another.”

“Fascinating,” says Regulus, eyes round with wonder.

Sirius cuts a fond look to his brother. One of these days, he’s going to come across a piece of knowledge that’s sufficiently esoteric for Reggie to find it dull. It has to happen sooner or later.

Ugnok looks pleasantly surprised. “Indeed.”

Sirius throws an arm over Regulus, not at all concerned whether the gesture is inappropriate. Ugnok won’t care, and he doesn’t want Regulus to think physical affection from his family is something to be ashamed of. “I see the value in doing things officially,” he says. “Do we have any other options?”

“You could report Orion and Walburga Black to the Ministry, and try to declare them unfit guardians,” says Ugnok, a deep well of cynical amusement colouring the gravelly voice.

A huff of humourless laughter escapes Sirius.

“Alternatively, you could file for emancipation. I would stake my axe the application will get thrown out before it reaches the Wizgamont. A child younger than fifteen isn’t going to get

emancipated, no matter how wealthy or intelligent."

Yeah, fair enough. "Then, it seems there's only one way."

"Indeed," replies Ugnok, lips curling a little. Is it a smile? A sneer?

"One question, if I may," says Regulus quietly. He's always quiet, he's days.

"Of course, young master Black." Ugnok is—as most adult sentient beings—somewhat charmed by his little brother, it seems. The hoarse texture of his voice doesn't smooth out, but it gentles slightly.

"Can I name Siri as the co-owner of my vault? I mean Sirius. Can I officially grant him access and full rights?"

Sirius takes a moment to work through the urge to smack himself in the face. "Indeed, can the same be done for my vault, with Regulus as the co-owner?"

Ugnok eyes them both with what Itachi considered unwarranted exasperation. "You could only get the one vault, then."

Sirius shrugs, enjoying the freedom to use the gesture without censure. "What possible reason do we have to not have a fail-safe?"

Ugnok growls something in goblin-tongue—that Sirius will not call Gobbledegook unless a born goblin confirms it's the official title and not, as it appeared, a clumsy slur—before nodding. "You might as well. You will be writing new precedent, or attempting to. An additional clause shouldn't make much of a difference."

"Thank you, Master Ugnak," chirps Regulus with a practised smile.

“You are welcome,” replies the goblin, displaying a mouthful of sharp teeth. “Now if you would turn your attention to the first stack of parchment, there is a chance we get through them before lunch.”

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They don’t make it in time for lunch, so, after a glance at their spindly wrists, the Goblin snarls at them and ushers them into a side room. Two trays overflowing with grilled meat and a pitcher of water are set in front of them. Ugnak’s glare dares them to make anything of it. “We reconvene in an hour,” he barks and storms off.

“I didn’t expect Goblins to be this nice,” says Regulus. The excitement and novelty of the day had awakened some of his slumbering appetite, and he attacks his pile of steaming meat with great enthusiasm.

“Neither did I.” If there is a polite way to eat meat straight off the bone, he doesn’t know it, especially since cutlery isn’t in evidence. “Then again, they probably didn’t expect us to be anything other than arrogant, spoiled monsters. He could be trying to condition us; reward good behaviour, in hopes of a repeat occurrence, that sort of thing.”

Regulus snorts. The juice from the rib he’s chewing at flows down his face. If Walburga could see them now. “I don’t know if I’m looking forward to my Presentation if that’s the case. I was curious about other children, but if they’re all like that, it could be a waste of time.”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that,” he says, remembering the excitement from his Presentation. “You will hardly meet any. I felt like I was there mostly to show proof of life.”

Regulus gestures for him to continue, waving the bone in his hand, drops of fat and juice flying through the air.

Sirius quirks a smile at the adorable chipmunk-cheeks. “Your Presentation will, Hecate-willing, be a less pompous affair. I already invited Heir Longbottom, who you will love, I

think. There is no getting around inviting some guests—allies of House of Black and the Vassal Houses at least—but we can cut down on the foreign dignitaries and such."

Reg's eyes sparkle. "F'rn' d'n'tr's?"

Adorable. "Well, there was Lady Kozyakova, who I'm pretty sure is a Rusalka—"

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Kreacher comes to collect them, which allows a small glimpse into interspecies politics. The goblins present in the room ignore Kreacher with an almost ritualistic determination. He doesn't see any outright derision or disgust in the charged interaction, which makes it easier to bear, even if only just. Mostly, it looks sad. Grieved, maybe. House elves are enslaved, he thinks, and goblins appear to him as an honour culture. It's not surprising that there is friction, there. Something to think about, going forward.

He clears his mind and focuses on the here and now. "Merry meet, Grandfather." Beside him, Reg echoes the greeting, timing his bow to match his perfectly.

"Merry meet, children. I take it your talk with the Goblins was successful?"

"In a matter of speaking. The account manager confirmed the necessity of independent vaults but having them in our names is—complicated."

"Oh?" Arcturus leans forward in his cushy armchair. Sirius takes a quick look around. He hadn't seen this sitting room before. A shame; it's a lovely little place, built for those days where you want to squeeze whatever comfort you can get from creature comforts, to compensate for everything else. Several cats lounging around complete the picture.

He tugs Reg into a two-person chaise. After a long day of sitting on hard marble, Sirius can track the warmth seeping into his bones. Izanami have mercy, but he sounds like an old man.

“Since minors aren’t allowed to own money or land, we will need to go via the Wizgamont, rather.”

“Oh, is that all?” Arcturus scoffs, flicking a dismissive hand. “Not to worry, boys. The Wizgamont can hardly refuse me anything, let alone something as trivial as personal vaults for my grandsons. How absurd.”

A ripple of fondness for the snobby old man rises in Sirius. He never expected much from the Black family, but he’s glad there is at least one family member he could work with. For all his many prejudices, the man is no Walburga. He cares at least nominally for the well-being of his family.

“The account manager suggested we kick the case to the law firm you have on retainer. Regulus and I completed the paperwork, and the rest is best left to the professionals.”

Arcturus nods absently, visibly organising his thoughts. “I agree. You have better things to do than waste time with solicitors and ministry rejects.”

Perfect segue; thank you, Lord Black. “Indeed. I would humbly request Regulus and myself be granted access to the libraries here at Castle Black. The library at our residence is—ah—highly specialised.”

Arcturus shoots him a knowing look. “I imagine so. What say your tutors? Don’t they provide materials?”

Bless. “Our tutors, when we had them, focused on. Caligraphy, eloquence, body language, histories and such. In recent weeks and in light of recent events, those lessons have stopped. I instruct Reg on the rare occasion he needs clarification. Mostly, however, we learn on our own.”

Arcturus looks at them for a long minute. “This is wholly unacceptable, you understand? As precocious as you are, your brother deserves a qualified, certified set of instructors.”

Sirius nods. “Once we have access to our vaults—”

“Damn the vaults,” Arcturus snaps. “No grandson of mine—” He breaks off and inhales a slow breath. “You will both make lists of tutors that instructed you in the past and of any additional subjects you are interested in. The tutoring will take place here.”

Perfect. “Of course,” Itachi says sweetly. “Thank you, Grandfather.”

Arcturus sighs. “And, next time you want me to do something, you can just *ask*. Leading me around the nose until I come to a conclusion you like is at least a waste of time.”

Reg makes a small, distressed sound that’s a hundred per cent for show. “Grandfather, we would *never*.”

“You would, you have, and you will,” Arcturus says, punctuating the sentence with a heartfelt sight. “It’s no less than I deserve, I suppose.”

Sirius makes sure to keep his tongue behind his teeth about what any of the adults in Reg’s life *deserve.*

“Moving on,” Arcturus continues. “I have sent firm instructions to your parents that you are under my direct protection. Normally, the communication between a Lord and his Heir is kept strictly private. With things being as they are, I think it’s best if the terms are known to all parties involved.” Meaning, he thought their parents would count on the two of them being kept in the dark and would use their ignorance to their advantage. “Your Kreacher will remove you from any dangerous situations, of course. I expect you to visit Castle Black at least once per day, not counting the lessons. Your parents are, at this time, not welcome, so your Kreacher will transport you.” Proof of life, and a chance to tell the truth without direct coercion. Not a bad setup.

“Thank you, Grandfather.”

A bitter little smile ages the Lord past his comfortable middle age. “Think nothing of it, child. Setting aside that this is the bare minimum, the children of House Black deserve the very best. We will work on improving your situation as things develop.”

In that, they are in agreement. While Sirius is an unholy abomination, Regulus is pure Black and he very much deserves the best.

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# Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Neverland

Sirius knows how quickly one's life can change, but he hardly expected a fight with Orion and Walburga Black to result in such an overwhelming change for the better. It's probably his fault, he thinks. He is used to all his problems being caused by sprawling, unknowable systems that can't easily be fought. In this case, it's looking like most of the pain was, in fact, only caused by their parents. Now that they are out of the picture, they both flourish.

The contrast could hardly be more stark. From stifling, isolated misery, they jump to near-infinite freedom. Grandfather's solicitors tore through the Ministry taking no quarter, and secured their vaults about six weeks after that first Gringotts meeting. With vaults filled with enough gold to last them to old age and next to no supervision, Sirius makes sure to indulge all whims to the extreme. If Regulus wants a rare text, they set about acquiring it without delay. If Sirius' tutors bring up an interesting potion, Kreacher brings him a gold cauldron and all the ingredients and textbooks he could need. They eat what they want, wear what they want, sleep when they want and for however long they want. Kreacher is there, of course, but the old elf is still getting his sea legs in this new journey of freedom and autonomy. While he's nominally property, Sirius and Regulus had spent a week writing an iron-clad vow, which they swore to with great relish. Neither of them could harm Kreacher with his bond, on pain of death. It was an emotional week.

Shortly after that, Sirius decides to use the rush of euphoria caused by doing the right thing and come clean. He'd sworn to himself, back when Reg was born; swore to Gods, spirits, demons or whoever else might be listening, that he would never keep secrets from his little brother. He's kept quiet until now, but Regulus is mature enough to know the truth. Or, at least, a somewhat sanitised version of the truth.

His confessions take a bit to force out, spread out over a week or so. It's just about the hardest thing he had to do—He had forgotten some and repressed most, and never, ever, expected he would have to put any of it in words.

Regulus doesn't understand most of it and thank Hecate for that. It's a sign Sirius managed to keep some shred of decency and innocence safe. He tries to comfort him, filled with the righteous fury of a young brother whose older brother has been wronged. Once he had gotten over the initial burst of indignation, Regulus does his best to empathise and understand, but it's all too abstract, for him. He doesn't understand hate, doesn't understand duty. More than anything, he doesn't understand betrayal. For all that books speak about instinctual familial bonds, Regulus saw their parents perhaps twenty times in memory. He wasn't betrayed by Orion, any more than he would be if a tutor attacked him. Touched, Sirius allows it and tries to keep himself more or less together.

Kreacher, though, Kreacher understands. He knows well what it's like to give your heart and service to another and be spat on for it, time and again. He knows what it's like to be betrayed. Kreacher is easily the most distraught of the three of them, followed closely by Sirius.

Time helps. Sirius is excellent at burying unpleasant truths, and Kreacher wouldn't have survived hundreds of years of slavery if he couldn't compartmentalise. Mostly, they don't mention his previous life much. Regulus would sometimes ask an abstract question of the culture, the history or the science, but they stay far, far away from anything concrete or, Merlin forbid, personal.

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With frequent visits and a significant step up in mental health, their relationship with Lord Black grows by leaps and bounds. It's not, strictly speaking, the healthiest relationship in the world—Arcturus sees them as a cross between friendly acquaintances and something of an investment. Considering all available evidence, it's all too likely this is as close to real affection as the man is capable of, so they don't take it personally. Instead, they make sure to come across as intelligent and well-bred, and, in return, Arcturus goes out of his way to provide what few luxuries and services they can't get for themselves.

The final thing that cemented the whimsical bent of their new lives is the bizarre back and forth with Orion Black. Walburga, for all her faults, had too much dignity to bother with her rebellious children. She had decided they are beneath contempt and re-focused her energies to more enjoyable projects, whatever they might be. Orion, however, decided to start cursing the house.

“It’s entirely possible,” Sirius says, bent over a set of cursed kitchen knives, safely contained behind a bubble of Kreacher’s magic, “that he has finally lost what claim on sanity he had.”

“He could be attempting a sideways assassination,” Regulus says, voice heavy with confusion. “If we die and he can make a Vow that he had nothing to do with it—Maybe—”

“If that is the case, why would he curse the thing himself?”

Regulus shrugs. “He would be the only Heir Grandfather had left. Maybe he thinks that’s enough.”

Doubtful. Very doubtful. Sirius has been paying close attention. Arcturus is delighted by the two of them, not precisely because of their character, but because of how much better they are from his son. Now that he has a taste of what he could have, Sirius doubts he will go back to a mindless cretin like Orion.

“Maybe.” He continues staring at the knives. It’s just so *childish*. Poison, he can understand. Airborne solution, maybe. But a set of flying knives? Who could that kill?

A pair of children, that’s who. Amusement sours in his belly. Sirius has a lifetime of training, but a normal child his age would not. A normal child might have *died*—

“Fine,” he says, determination solidifying. “Fine. He set the rules of the game, and we will respect them. No direct interaction, only clever little *tricks*. Aha-ha.”

Reg sends him a look. “I don’t know, Siri. We could just tell Grandfather and stay away.”

They *could.*

“Just tricks,” he says. “No direct engagement. And, if he unearths some hidden cache of diabolical ingenuity, we disengage and go to Castle Black immediately. Fair?” He sends

Kreacher a questioning look. “Fair?”

“Kreacher—” Frustration flashes over his face. “*I* think it is reckless but harmless enough under the condition Kreacher places the traps and only when you are safe with the Great Lord.”

Sirius nods easily. Kreacher’s magic is practically endless, and he knows this house better than any living thing. “Deal.”

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Initial hesitation aside, Reg throws himself into a campaign of sabotage eagerly and with great relish. True to his word, Sirius makes sure they stay firmly in the realm of petty nonsense. As much as he may think he wants revenge, Sirius knows Reg would be crushed if any real harm befell Orion.  Additionally, they couldn’t cause much damage even if they tried. Sirius’s magic is still too wispy and unreliable, and he has real difficulty forcing his scepticism down.

In that sense, Reg is a far superior caster. He wasn’t born as pre-made as Sirius, and he has no issue believing that items can be made invisible or that stairs can be charmed to deliberately trip whoever steps on them. Unfortunately, while he has the imagination for it, he doesn’t have the willpower and the focus to impress his will upon the world.

So, their first attempt is a contact poison spread over the floor of Orion’s bath that combines a nightmare-inducing potion and a sleeping aid. Orion replies with a nasty curse on the carpet in front of their rooms that would first paralyse then suffocate them. Sirius and Regulus infuse a tub of wax with a hallucinogen potion, mould it into candles and switch them with the ones in the storage rooms. That one is a great success because it takes the dim man days to discover what is happening, and he kept attacking the hallucinations in the meantime.

Unfortunately, his response is a rather disproportionate wildfire curse that Reg almost triggers when he reaches out to pick up a vaguely familiar book.

“Enough,” Kreacher says, once they all calmed down. “Ex-master is contracting professionals. This is enough.”

---

Grandfather is furious when Sirius lays out the situation. “Foolish, reckless—” He surges up from his arm-chair and goes for the drinks cabinet. “Why would you perpetuate the hostilities? I thought you liked the non-interference state of affairs.”

Sirius shrugs. “He started it,” he points out. He’s a child, isn’t he? He is owed this. “And we put a stop to it, anyhow. We vanished all the doors to our rooms and won’t cross into their parts anymore.”

“I can hardly believe—” Arcturus gulps down a glass of wine far too quickly. “I will start looking into discrete institutions, for him. You are one thing, but he—”

Huh. “I read about a few places like that,” he says, improvising wildly. He hasn’t but something like that definitely exists. The inbreeding among the Pureblood population has most certainly produced any number of lunatics with too much gold and magical power for anyone’s comfort. “Tasteful retreat for the, ah. Mentally stressed.”

“If he’s going about cursing knives and books—” Arcturus sighs. “I will look into it. It will have to happen after your Presentation, Regulus. I won’t have that scandal overshadow your entry into society.”

Of course not, Sirius thinks. The reputation is the only thing that matters, after all. Why make sure a man trying to murder children is safely locked away—

Never mind that. You are getting what you want, more or less. With some care and planning you won’t have to cross paths with Orion and Walburga at all. And, if not—If not, you can take steps.

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Without the distraction of Orion Black, Worm Extraordinaire, things settle down into something approaching normal. In deference to Grandfather's wishes—and Sirius's paranoia—they don't set foot in Wizarding spaces. Since Sirius feels no need to socialize with anyone except his brother, Kreacher or, more distantly, Grandfather, and Regulus is a nerd at heart, they're both happy to leave the messy matter of people and culture aside and focus on theory. Potions, transfigurations, charms, astronomy, alchemy—this world is resplendent with topics, each one more fantastical than the last. Soon enough, they find their comfort zones. Regulus has all the hallmarks of a born scholar, happiest in more abstract, theoretical fields. Sirius, in contrast, focuses on more practical subjects. Healing, for example, is fascinating, but so are Potions. Then, entirely, he stumbles across enchanting, more specifically, runic magic, and he knows this is it.

You can do almost anything with runic magic, he learns, from wards to enchanting to a crazy concept called Wizard's Space he decides is too much for him to tackle just yet. The literature on the matter is expectedly vague. Most really impressive feats were either patented magic, kept for the private use of the Houses that made it or are lost in time. The only things the books agree on are: One, you need masteries in Arithmancy and Magical Theory to even think of working in the field. Two, it was a rich man's game. Why this is so remains unclear. Maybe it's simply that training an enchanter took a long time?

With all that said, Sirius is happy with the knowledge that he found his calling. Runic magic all the way, and a familiarity with Potions and Charms. And battle magic, of course, and not the fancy type when two idiots stand across one another and cast spells until one wins. If Sirius decides to fight someone, he will be armed with the strongest shields, a bubble-headed charm, heavy-duty body armour, and a slew of potions of varying lethality. Even then the first and only plan is to distract, dart forward, and start snapping bones before things escalate. Curses are serious business; one hit and you're out, for the most part. No, no 'Wizard duels' for him, not unless he wants to duel as a sport.

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Neither of the Black brothers got into the habit of birthdays. When they were smaller, Kreacher did his best to inject some whimsy into their lives with impressive magical displays. After Sirius's doomed Presentation, the already strained tradition atrophied entirely. This all means that, when Regulus's ninth birthday is coopted by the spectacle of his Presentation, neither of them cares much.

Grandfather, having had over a year to prepare excuses beforehand, sent Orion and Walburga to see about the Black properties in the Americas some months before. As polite fictions go, this one was just about as paper-thin as you can get, but it served the purpose. The Society

knew the event would be organised and hosted by the Lord and Lady Black, once again at Castle Black.

As statements go, this one was impressive. Oh, it wasn't *scandalous,* especially not if compared to all the chaos surrounding Sirius and Regulus for years. What it was, is eccentric. Having the Presentation of your 'spare' as grand as that of the 'heir' signalled some confusing things to the masses. Why, it's almost as if the Lord valued both Black children equally, Hecate forbid.

The list of guests was, as promised, markedly tamer. There was no getting around inviting all the Sacred Twenty-Eight, but the Vassal houses could be left out. Regulus instead organised elaborate gifts to be delivered to them, instead. If Blacks were any less upper-class, this eccentricity would have been thought of as gauche. In their case, they likely started a new trend. It also gave Regulus the chance to plan thoughtful gifts to the dozens upon dozens of families living on Black land.

Politeness dictates an invitation sent out by an Heir is addressed to another Heir. An invitation sent by Regulus, the second son of the Heir, would ordinarily be sent to whatever equivalent is on offer. Since Lord Arcturus Black sent out the invitations, they went directly to the Lord of the House.

That wouldn't have meant much, in more ordinary circumstances. A Lord or Lady of standing would hardly attend the Presentation of a child that's so far removed from the line of succession. This Presentation, however, was one of the most talked about children in Britain. Orion and Walburga, being hard-line Traditionalists only set out the typical notices that subtly indicated another child was born into the Black family. Past that, only the tutors saw a hair of Regulus, and they were bound up by secrecy vows that didn't let them spread the word much. Word had gotten out, of course, about two genius children growing up in mysterious circumstances, raised by Walburga and Orion Black of all maniacs. The series of scandals in the past year only fed the rumours. With all that in mind, it's not that odd that Lord Black got notice after notice that every available Lord or Lady invited would attend personally, or at least send their Heir.

Both brothers were banished from Castle Black a week before the Presentation was due, to not spoil the surprise. While it will be slightly less politically charged, most of the important Purebloods will be attending. The preparations are going to take some doing especially, and this is where Sirius and Arcturus are in absolute agreement, in the matters of security. Having so many witches and wizards coming and going means the Wards would have to be muted or modified. The first is unacceptable, and the second is costly, in time and gold.

Sirius and Regulus spent the week relaxing, not too stressed about the event. His one worry is Lord Riddle. More specifically, it's Regulus' incessant curiosity about the man. His brother reacted to the news that Sirius was impressed and intimidated by the man with the good sense the Goddess gave lichen and decided the man must be fascinating and Regulus must meet him. With any luck, Sirius will manage to steer him away.

On the day of, Sirius and Regulus surrender to Kreacher with good grace. The elf still wasn't clear on his personality, but he was certain of what a Proper Pureblood Prince looked like.

A whole thing is made out of it. Both of them are fluent in English Wizarding Fashion, Sirius more than Regulus; while Regulus is a child with a child's tastes, Sirius once was an adult—if the mindless automaton that walked the Elemental Nations could be called such. When he stops to think about it, Itachi and Sirius added together more or less made a mature mind. What this means, in this case, is that Sirius is a world-class snob. This snobbery extended to every expression of luxury goods he could get his paws on. Finest fabrics, elaborate skincare potions, cosmetics and such. The idea of taking frivolity and elevating it to an art form spoke to him.

Kreacher and Regulus conspired about the outfits, he's aware. They wear matching robes, in opposite colours: Regulus is draped in traditional white, while Sirius wears pitch-black. In every other respect, the cut of the garments is identical, a fusion of Wizarding couture and Elemental Nations fashion. Uchiha fashion, to be precise. The sleeves, for one, were noticeably wider and stopped just short of the wrist. Instead of the traditional British closed robe, they both wore it open, displaying the elegant shirts tucked into high-waisted trousers.

On the issue of flaunting their wealth, they had to be creative. While Reg insisted they could repeat the same silk-platinum trick as they had with Sirius, Kreacher would have none of it. He scoured the world and came back with a bolt of fabric from Egypt, so expensive that only their high priests and Heads of Houses wore it. The fabric was fine but common linen, but the weave was a secret known only to the Egyptians. Once the thread was spun, the weaving process was integrated into a ritual that took a year to complete—an entire rotation of the sun. Neither Sirius nor Regulus had the funds for it, vaults or not, but Lord Black was happy enough to splurge. House of Black had significant holdings in Egypt, after all, so they had both the means and the connections to get their paws on the priceless fabric.

As for Sirius, his clothing was minimalistic in design, and he was content with a combination of Acromantula-silk for the outer robe and soft linen for the rest. To compensate, he

commissioned a piece of jewellery. A platinum choker, inlaid with soft velvet, was fitted to his body so it followed the line of his neck and shoulders perfectly, the back of the necklace widening to cover his vulnerable nape. It cost a fortune to make, and even more to set all the charms he had commissioned. Money well spent, in his humble opinion, since it will make bowing somewhat less nerve-wracking.

Kreacher will remain in the shadows, which would be more aggravating if it wasn't what the elf wanted. Free or not, the elf had little use for a bunch of Wizards who see his kind as little more than vermin.

Primped and ready, they made for a striking image, he has to admit. White at a party is odd, yes, but they are a rather morbid bunch. Kreacher bought a camera just for this purpose and happily snapped a photograph of the two boys standing in front of the fireplace.

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# Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The Presentation pt 1

Grandfather picks them up. The new security only allows people through via a specific portkey—another wizarding invention Sirius will learn how to make if it kills him. The Wards are charged with so much magic, they would stop a rampaging Bijū in its tracks. All in all, other than the one-way time-limited portrays, nobody is going in or out of Castle Black other than Lord and Lady Black.

It amused Sirius endlessly. The first time he'd heard it, he was struck with a thought the Grandfather was concerned more with solving a potential crime, than preventing it. Then again, considering the people he calls allies, he could be forgiven. If Lord Riddle, say, decided to commit a crime, he would do so. The most they could hope for is to make it too inconvenient to bother.

"Well," says Arcturus upon seeing them. "As statements go, I cannot say the two of you do not impress. What exactly is it you are trying to say is unclear, but you are saying it loudly. " He leans forward, taking in the exquisite lines of Regulus's robes. "You will possibly start a new trend."

"Thank you, Grandfather," says Regulus. His smile is crooked, unpracticed, all the more treasured for it.

"Your Grandmother will be pleased. Now, we will be portkeying at the door to the ballroom, where Melania is waiting for us. Regulus will walk in first. Sirius, you will be no more than a half-step behind him. Melania and I will follow you."

"Yes, Grandfather."

“Excellent.”

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“Lady Hecate, you two are a vision,” exclaims Lady Black. “Regulus, your robes are marvellous, and Sirius, that neckpiece is splendid too. A bit severe, perhaps, but it works for you. ”

“Thank you, Lady Black,” they reply. They have been practising speaking in unison on and off for a year now, which both of their Grandparents are well aware of.

“Oh, not this again. You will behave, children. The last Presentation was—what it was. This time you will not put so much as a toe out of line.”

“Yes, Grandmother.”

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He and Regulus have worked on developing his posture and gait, of course, they had. Melania helped far more. And yet, Regulus is nine; nine and kept away from people for most of his life. He doesn’t trip, thank the Gods, but his steps are jerky, and Sirius can see the minute shakes of his hands.

His magic is entirely too volatile to try and comfort him with it. They’re both the centre of attention, as they walk down the stairs. Every flaw is noted, analysed and remembered. Idiots, he thinks, rage bubbling up in his stomach. The wretched hyenas have taken note of his brother’s nerves, and find him less worthy for it. And, to make matters worse, those eyes tend to slip over his brother and settle onto him, greedy and approving.

He ignores them all, of course. Anyone who would judge an under-socialised child is no friend of his. Not strictly speaking an enemy yet, but getting there. He sweeps his eyes over the crowd discreetly.

The Longbottom matriarch is there, as is her son. In fact, Frank is waving at them presently with a picture-perfect dumb smile, giant and handsome and eye-searingly Light.

Sirius blinks. Huh, now that he thinks about it, the guests have grouped themselves by their political leanings quite handily; Dark and Light at the opposite sides of the hall, with the Neutrals acting as a buffer.

The Dark are furthest away from him, and he can't pick them out, but for Lord Riddle, of course. He's half a head taller than his fellows, for one, and his magic is visible, audible, and tastable in the air.

If he was introduced to the Neutrals, he can't recall. The faces are vaguely familiar, but then again all English Purebloods look more or less the same. He recalled some of them were dangerous and thus interesting, but other than that—nothing.

The Light is definitely more notable, and not just because their magic made his hiss; any group that includes the Longbottoms is more notable. Augusta Longbottom is about half her son's height, but the diminutive witch towers over everyone by sheer disagreeableness. Lady Prewett is there too, for some unfathomable reason, as is the recently widowed Lady Shacklebolt.

All in all, a heap of aristocrats, and nary a commoner in sight. Without the minor houses and vassal houses to bolster their numbers, they're whittled down to the essentials. And, in this company, it's not very safe to let the volatile elements mix freely. It's probably for the best their guests had the sense to keep themselves in separate camps. If they keep it up, Sirius and Regulus will be home and in bed before the duels start.

They've finally reached the end of the staircase, and Arcturus whispers behind them. "As discussed. We go from Light to Dark. Remember who you are, fear no one and nothing. You've nary an equal in this room, and not a single superior, here or anywhere."

Regulus straightens his back, visibly mimicking Sirius' posture. With half a glance to Arcturus, he gets a subtle nod, and moves closer to Regulus, close enough that his brother relaxes slightly.

Lady Longbottom is first, staring them down imperiously. Arcturus and Melania start up a conversation with another Lady, to give them an illusion of privacy—they want the Lonbottoms to like the heirs since the rest of them are a lost cause.

“Merry meet,” greets Regulus and sweeps a bow beyond reproach. Sirius echoes the greeting. The charmed necklace is a wonder; his nerves barely twinge at the bow.

“Merry meet,” greets the Lady, nodding at them.

Her son is nowhere near as reserved. “Merry meet, Master Black,” he bows to Regulus. “Merry meet, Sirius.” Another bow to him, but the greeting is chirped, sing-singed almost. Me-Ery Me-Eet, like a girl of three and not a highlander Noble Heir.

Regulus blinks at them, stuck mute by the dragon-lady and her knight-son.

“Frank,” hums Sirius, swooping in to rescue his brother. It’s not fair that his first introduction was to the most inexplicable House in the Castle. “It’s a pleasure to see you. I was glad to hear House Longbottom accepted our invitation.”

Frank beams at him, showing every single one of his large white teeth. “I would have come to see Castle Black alone; you’re extra. And Regulus, of course, I had to come after your brother spoke of you so dearly. I dare say he spoke the truth.”

Sirius puffs up in pride, and Regulus just blinks, head slightly tilted back so that he can see the tall boy.

“Thank you,” says Regulus, only barely stuttering. “I am also glad to meet you, Heir Longbottom. My brother spoke of you fondly as well.”

“Did he,” exclaims Frank, and winks (!) at Sirius. “I am flattered, my friend. I look forward to you joining me at Hogwarts next year.”

This boy. A helpless smile skitters up his throat and tilts his lips. Whatever game Frank is playing, he is difficult to resist. Charisma and unselfconscious joy practically envelop him as a cloud.

“Tell me, young master Black,” snaps Lady Longbottom. “Where are your parents? Two sons and two Presentations, and neither is seen.”

Thank the Goddess, but the Lady chose one topic Regulus will not get flustered by. His face blanks, shoulders relaxing. “Our Father and Mother were regrettably prevented from attending. They are managing the Black Properties in North America at the moment.”

“It must be hard for children to be without their mother for so long,” says Lady Longbottom, eyes steely and unfeeling.

Regulus is nowhere near as good with controlling his expression as Sirius is yet, and the flash of disdain is visible. “Indeed, Lady Longbottom. Our mother’s absence is felt deeply. Please, call me Regulus, if you would. There are simply too many Blacks here for the appellation to make any practical sense.”

The Lady’s dark eyes scrutinise them both sharply. “Very well, young Regulus. Tell me, which subjects do you enjoy?”

Sirius relaxes fully, as a gleam of interest enters his little brother’s eyes, and he enters into a rapid-fire discussion with the Lady, all notions of shyness forgotten. Which was a kind thing for her to do, all things considered.

“It seems my Lady mother is as taken with your little brother as I am with you, Sirius,” murmurs Frank under his breath. For once his voice is pitched so that it doesn’t reach further than Sirius. He sends the tall boy a sharp glance, but the laughing dark eyes give nothing away.

“I’m not touching that sentence with a ten-meter broom, Frank,” he says, dry. “So, let us change the topic to less fraught topics. Grindelwald massacres, perhaps?”

Frank blinks, blinks again, and his smile twitches into a less idiotic, more shrewd expression for a moment, before it’s folded neatly back into mindless cheer. Got you. “Why, Sirius, was that a joke? I knew there was a real boy underneath the pomp and the violence.”

He lets his lips curve as they would; there is hardly a reason to swallow it. “I assure you, Heir presumptive of House of Black does not joke.”

Frank nods solemnly. “My apologies, your dark majesty. Your humble servant begs forgiveness.”

Sirius sneaks a glance at Lord and Lady Black who are chatting with Lady Abbot. He’s relatively safe. He draws himself up, throwing his shoulders back, arching his neck and arranging his face into the most arrogant, aloof expression he knows.

“You are forgiven.”

They share an amused look, before turning to their respective family members.

Sirius shouldn’t have been worried about Lord and Lady Black taking issue with his behaviour, not when Regulus has forgotten that he is speaking to the widowed matriarch of the House of Longbottom.

He stares at the scene for a long moment, mind blank. He should probably step in, and soon. But—how? Regulus might be unspeakably rude, but interrupting their conversation would be catastrophic. He sends a faintly pleading look at Frank, but the boy looks at the disaster with a gleam of satisfaction. Frank doesn’t seem the type who would take pleasure in humiliating a boy of nine, so what is he missing?

He looks back to the scene and focuses on the Lady. She is—not displeased? She looks like she's enjoying the conversation. Amused lines crinkle around her eyes, and the corner of her lip keeps twitching. What exactly they're discussing is immaterial; something to do with arithmancy applications in the design and construction of cauldrons of all the asinine things. But nothing suggests that she is in any way displeased with the way the newest Black child is acting.

"This is perfect," murmurs Frank. "Mother adores precocious children. You are entirely too violent to earn her favour, but you couldn't have engineered a better first impression if you tried."

Sirius looks at the boy for a long moment. Frank is invested in this. Unexpectedly complex and overarching facades aside, Frank wants the Blacks, or at least wants to build a relationship with them. The question then becomes why? It could be the usual, money, social prestige, and so forth. Not very likely. House of Longbottom is as notoriously Light as House of Black is Dark. He gains little from an alliance and loses a lot of support from its faction.

Frank notices his stare and pastes a cheery smile on his face. "I am ever so glad. I am so happy when my family and my friends get along."

Sirius hums noncommittally. He needs more intel. The politics of this world are messy and exhausting, and he hadn't given them any thought past the bare bones he picked up via osmosis.

(Or he could bide his time until their majority, grab his brother and Kreacher, and book it out of Britain. Regulus, Kreacher and Sirius can make their home in the farthest, sunniest tropical island they can find, and spend the rest of their days sweltering in the sun and getting sunburned. That's also an option.)

Regulus interrupts the bizarre twists of his thoughts. Puffed up almost double his size in indignation, he turns to Sirius. "Siri, I need a quill and parchment. Some people need actual illustrations to see sense, apparently."

Sirius manfully represses a bark of laughter, but he can't stop the wide grin from spreading on his face. His brother is a marvel. "While that may be true," he says, keeping his voice

even as best he can, “the discussion may be perhaps postponed until a later time? We are, after all, at your Presentation.”

Regulus starts a little, having obviously forgotten that little detail, and two forces battle it out in him for a long moment. Academic zeal to prove his point ends up losing narrowly against the wrath of Lady Melania.

“True,” he admits grudgingly. He turns back to the Lady, who is only impassive to a very inexperienced observer. He tries to smooth his expression into politeness, but only partly succeeds. “May I send you correspondence, Lady Longbottom?”

“I insist on it, young Regulus. I’ve yet to prove to you that you are incorrect.”

Regulus’ smile turns into a weak, insincere little grimace that suggests a host of aspersions of the Lady’s character, family tree and bedroom activities. “I look forward to our correspondence, Lady. Siri, come. We should meet someone else.” He blinks at the Lady, lips still twisted in the sickly smile. “Anyone else.”

“Right away. Frank, Lady—my Lord and Master beckons. Merry part.”

“Merry part,” echo the two Longbottoms, each more amused than the last.

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“Ooooh, that woman,” hisses Regulus. Sirius would bet both of his eyes, that the boy didn’t remember a single soul he’d met in the past twenty minutes, busy stewing with frustration.

“Lady Longbottom is a formidable Lady, yes.”

“She doesn’t know the first thing about Arithmancy, Siri!”

Oh, I think she does, he thinks fondly. I think she had fun winding you up.

“We will discuss it later, little brother,” he says. “Grandmother will chop you up into itty bitty pieces if you don’t focus. This is not an arena where you can afford to be distracted.”

“Fine,” spits Regulus, and draws himself up. “But I will write her a long and stern letter, do you hear me.”

“As well you should.”

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# Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Presentation pt 2

They get little time to compose themselves before they have to dive into the clutch of the Neutrals. Regulus's rage held him strong for a while, but nerves are making themselves known. Alright: a plan.

He meanders to the Lord and Lady Black and pretends to look around the canapés. "Can we steer him toward scholars?"

"Indeed we can," says Arcturus casually scanning the room. "We have plenty to choose from. Would it help?"

"I believe so." He snags a bit of cream-topped salmon. He needs an offering to his brother, after all, and Regulus loves fish. For all that the boy doesn't like cats, he's eerily like one himself. Then again, Sirius has never seen a cat that isn't at best mildly murderous about any and all felines, so. Fits.

"Lord Marcus Slughorn, and his hair Horace," whispers Grandmother behind them. "Heir Slughorn is the Head of Slytherin at Hogwarts, which makes him an invaluable ally to cultivate."

Regulus's eyes glint at the whispered instruction, while Sirius nods, completely disinterested. He will be very, very surprised if he needs his Black name to help him excel at schoolwork. His classmates will be eleven, honestly. He has something of a head-start.

“Merry meet, Lord Slughorn, Heir Slughorn.” Regulus’s welcoming bow is angled flawlessly, as is the polite smile on his face.

“Merry meet.” The Lord nods at the two of them and bows deep to their trailing Grandparents. Heir Slughorn follows although he bows to Sirius as well.

Lord Marcus Slughorn Lord is a plain man, which is odd in itself. English Wizarding Nobility was almost to a wizard selected for a certain type of well-bred loveliness. While variety suffered, they did manage to produce the extremes of their category. That category consisting of tall, willowy bodies, and elfin, otherworldly features. Lord Slughorn doesn’t seem to bother with any of it. He’s far from slovenly, but his attire is decidedly severe, matching his too-long, sallow face. His hair is white, long and thin, stuck together in weak-looking clumps. Not ugly, definitely not, but given the strong impression of a man concerned with almost everything else except appearances.

His son, in contrast, is the very image of indigence and love of finer things in life. Of an average height, plump and rosy-cheeked. His hairline is steadily decreasing, and his robes are almost comically flamboyant. In fact, Heir Slughorn weaves the performance of a harmless hedonist with such determination, Sirius’s inner Shinobi stands up and takes note. While he wasn’t interested in politicking—especially not with schoolteachers, for goodness sake—this man is more than he seems.

“My Lord,” says Regulus, breaking the silence easily. “I have greatly enjoyed your paper on the hybridization of Dirigible Plums. Please, do you plan on publishing more about your methods?”

And—they’re off. Perfect. It’s not clear if Regulus noticed his interest, and thus provided the opportunity to converse with the Heir, but he is speaking the truth. Sirius remembers when Regulus stumbled across that paper and the minor obsessive episodes about Herbology that ensued.

“Heir Slughorn,” he says pleasantly. “I hear you are the Head of House Slytherin. You must be very proud of the accomplishment.”

The portly man can’t quite meet his eyes, and the smile that spreads on his face is false and strained. “Ah, yes, Heir Black, thank you. Yes.”

Sirius blinks at him. Now this is unexpected. Is the man frightened? Of Sirius? Whyever would he be frightened of Sirius? Let's try another approach. "I will be attending Hogwarts soon, and am looking forward to your instruction. I'm sure you have much wisdom to share."

Slughorn shudders. It's small and barely noticeable, but an actual shudder trembles down his shoulders. "Yes, I—I was looking forward to your joining my house since your Presentation. Your cousins are all Slytherins, of course."

"Indeed."

He hums noncommittally, observing the man closely. He doesn't remember Slughorn from his Presentation, he would have been invited as an Heir to a respectable Neutral House. Interesting. It's all conjecture, of course, but that could explain some of this. If Heir Slughorn was present and he had seen beyond Grandfather's illusion to his, ah, disarrayed appearance, he could have been taken aback. Then again, would a few bloodstains cause this much apprehension? Surely not.

Should he try to diffuse it? Probably. Will he? Absolutely not. "It would be my honour to count myself as one of your students," he murmurs, allowing some of the calculation to shine through his polite smile.

Slughorn pales and clasps his arms behind his back. "Yes, of course. Thank—Thank you." He is quiet for a beat, before exclaiming, "Oh, I do apologise, but I just spotted a very dear friend. I do beg your pardon, but I am afraid I simply must be off. Merry part, Master Black, Heir Black, Lady Black, Lord Black."

And with a last bow—too deep to be polite, but too honest to be mocking—he waddles off to hide. His Lord Father notices the swift retreat and barks his farewells before hurrying after his errant heir.

"Interesting," says Grandfather. "Sirius, you didn't do anything to him, did you?"

“No,” replies Sirius just as mystified. “I did not a thing to any Slughorns alive or dead. And yet, he’s terrified of me. Brother, how was your conversation?”

“Informative. Lord Slughorn is a pioneer in his field. More importantly, he was perfectly pleasant. Whatever problem his son has with you, he doesn’t share.”

“Something to be kept in mind, perhaps. It will certainly make your schooling memorable.”

Sirius hums. “Indeed it will.”

Lord and Lady Shafiq meander to their little group, then, and there is no more time to think about puzzling adults.

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“The Dark families are left. You need not worry too much, here,” Sirius says under his breath. They are currently between groups, getting some refreshments and giving Regulus some time to compose himself. He had just about come to blows with young Heir Ollivander, who was about Regulus’s age, and just as bratty when it came to scholarly matters. “They will want to like you. Be as hard as you can, with them. They appreciate strength and viciousness.”

“I don’t appreciate that, so,” murmurs Regulus, trembling with nerves.

“As I said, they want to like you. They liked me fine, and I came with bloody clothing and half a mind to murder everyone in the room.”

“Which would make them like you, not me. I like books and numbers and animals. I don’t like violence and terror. That’s what I’ve got you for.”

Sirius smiles, charmed. “You do indeed. And they know that. So I’ve got the part covered. You just do you. How about this? Do you see Lord Flint? He’s a Master Herbologist, and he’s the one who managed to breed Britain’s magical variant of the Mulberry tree. There is no reason why you can’t spend the time chatting to him about it. ”

Regulus’s eyes widen and glaze over slightly. “Really? A magical mulberry tree? How do you know this?”

Sirius raises an eyebrow, to little effect. “I do know some things you don’t.”

Regulus waves his hand impatiently. “Yes, yes, but about—dangerous, fighting things, not cool scholarly things.”

“Not at all true,” Sirius teases. “I am in fact researching my future Mastery, and have been since March.”

Regulus’ eyes narrow. “We will talk about this later, Siri, so help me. Now, explain about Lord Flint.”

He shrugs. “I like silk. Mulberry trees are the only things silkworms eat. The Asian countries all have their species of magical mulberry trees, and silkworms of course, but they refuse to share them. Lord Flint has been working on this for decades. It’s a towering achievement, one that will see him as a comfortably rich House—not as much as Notts or Malfoys, but far above those like Parkinsons and Yaxleys.”

“Creating a magical plant—How does that even *work*—Quick, Siri, I must pick his brain.”

Mission complete.

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The introductions go off without a hitch. Ironically, Regulus makes an excellent impression, since his disinterested eyes pass over the gathered Lords without a hint of fear. After procedural greetings, Regulus pounces on Lord Flint, peppering him with questions about his work and life and handwriting style. The Lord, an unassuming man, getting along in years, is entirely baffled by this strange child interrogating him when there are so many more important Lords in the room. Nevertheless, he's a scholar before he's anything else, and interest is interest. It helps that Regulus asks intelligent questions, and wants to know everything.

Lord and Lady Black, as is the custom, remain back, and let the children do as they would; it's considered terribly gauche for guardians to step in unless necessary. They snag their conversational partners—two Neutral Ladies that walked by—and for all the world aren't paying attention.

This means Sirius has to amuse the Lords somehow. Lord Riddle is there, as expected, as are Lord Malfoy, Lord Nott, and Lord Rosier, who were present at his Presentation. In addition, two more Lords came this time,  Lord LeStrange and Lord Carrow—and not a Heir in sight. What an improbable chain of events.

It's perhaps safest for Sirius to break the ice, as it were, and at least try to control the conversation somehow. "Please, my Lords, excuse my brother's distraction. He is, even after adjusting for my brotherly bias, a budding scholar. I've spoken to him about Lord Flint's research, and he could not be contained."

"No matter," says Lord Riddle. Like last time, when Riddle speaks, everyone else tenses, quietens and listens. Lord Flint and Regulus have wandered off to the nearby table while everyone was occupied by Sirius, presumably to get writing materials for their discussion. "I noticed you met Heir Slughorn?"

Sirius already decided the best way to handle Riddle was to be as Uchiha as possible. No child of eleven is dangerous, no matter how trained; not to this man. That said, he can be interesting. Interesting and too bothersome to eliminate. He meets the dangerous man's eyes without fear but with a lifetime's worth of caution. Riddle looks—tired. His eyes have sunken further, and the dark circles have grown more pronounced. His lips are bitten red, and he looks wilder than before. If the rest of the Purebloods look fey, he looks Unseeile, eyes glinting with cruel amusement only cats and Dark Elves can truly possess.

There was a question. Focus. Sirius tilts his head sideways, letting some of his amusement at the cowardly man show. “Heir Slughorn appeared to be quite, ah, *averse* to my presence. I worry I may have offended him somehow. My Hogwarts years are about to begin after all.”

Riddle’s eyes glint. He looks curious for a moment before a note of real humour lightens his eyes and settles in the upturned corner of his lips. “Is that so? Thank you, Heir Black, for this delightful bit of information. “

Sirius is not the Heir. For Lord Riddle to be referring to him as such is a statement, one that doesn’t go unheard in the company. He has a feeling Arcturus is already recalculating his attachment to his son if even his allies consider a ten-year-old child to be the better choice.

He meets Riddle’s eyes and inclines his head. A favour for a favour. “Please, my Lord, call me Sirius.” There you go. Heir Presumptive of the Blacks names you Lord. That is far from nothing.

Flawless lips twitch into a satisfied smirk. “I think I will, young Regulus. To return to the topic at hand, I believe Heir Slughorn may find your resemblance to a former student of his disquieting. He is, when it comes down to it, a collector. By his very nature, he would have cherished Heir Black, especially since he taught the previous.”

It takes a moment to parse through the new information. The dig at Orion is delicious, of course, but—Former student? Is he—

Does he dare ask? He surpasses a semi-hysterical snort. Absolutely not. He might be an amusing curiosity to the Lord, but as things stand, Riddle could crush him without pausing for breath, and the same cannot be said for other assembled Lord. With the others, he could escape. They would underestimate him, they would look down on him, they could be manipulated and worked around. Not Riddle. He would go for the quickest, meanest death, without hesitation or mercy.

Most he dares is to let the question shine from his eyes as he meets Riddle’s.

“Indeed, I speak of myself,” hums the Lord, lips ticking up, up, up, until teeth peek out behind his lips. It’s not a nice smile.

“As you say, my Lord,” he says after a moment’s pause. “Although I do not dare claim any such resemblance.”

Lord Riddle huffs out a sort-of-but-not-really huff of amusement. “Indeed, little Black. I do not think we are very much alike at all.”

There is subtext there, but Sirius doesn’t think the words to be meant as an insult. Or a praise. A mere statement of fact.

“I wouldn’t know, my Lord.” He twitches his head into a small nod, studying the older man. “But I can see why Heir Slughorn would be distressed by the reminder.”

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# Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The Letter

The Presentation is the height of success. Grandfather is so pleased, that he has bought them an island as a reward. Sirius honestly cannot begin to understand the ludicrous amounts of wealth the Black family has amassed over the centuries. They have an island. Regulus and Sirius will, once they are legally allowed to own property, have an island in the Caribbean entirely in their name.

Bewildering displays of wealth aside, there is a dark side to their inexplicable rise in status and most of it is his fault. The Presentation was a success, yes, but it also resulted in Lord Riddle addressing Sirius as Heir Black—and both Orion and Walburga took it personally.

Should he have made a thing of it, back then? He would have been able to quash the rumours. He *could* have demurred. If he had done so in a pathetic enough fashion, Riddle and his minions would have been disgusted enough to write him then and there.

However, and this is more or less the sticking point, he despises Orion Black to the ends of the world. There are not a lot of things he wouldn't do to humiliate and disgrace the man. To be widely known to be inferior to your eleven-year-old son is the epitome of disgrace. Sirius was never going to give that up. Not to avoid the increase in hostilities, not to keep Walburga's dubious neutrality, not for anything. The two traitors are alive, which is a step too far in his opinion. That's as much consideration as he will ever give them.

With that said, there are downsides. Regulus grows wearier by the day. Even his beloved texts struggle to hold his interest. He flinches at sudden noises and raised voices render him close to catatonic. It's understandable that he is irrationally uncomfortable with violence. He's a child, who is coping with his trauma as best he can. Nevertheless, now that Walburga and Orion are in the house at all times, screaming rows are quickly becoming the norm. Well, that's not strictly speaking true. Walburga doesn't scream, and Itachi hasn't screamed since Shisui died. Orion makes up the difference.

This brings them neatly to the other major downside. Sirius's dual personality is glitching. For almost two years, he's lived his life as Sirius, a nominally happy civilian boy. His father screaming at him at all times and his mother trying to bring him to heel with increasingly unhinged methods are interfering with that. The arraignment was: Sirius when he was a civilian and Itachi when he was fighting. Now, the two are getting confused. More and more, he'd wake up as Sirius and, by the time he dealt with whatever unpleasantness there was that day, he would go to sleep as Itachi. It's a problem.

The clock is ticking down. Itachi is chronologically about thirty years old. He is not a child, and moreover, he's a man taught over a long stretch of time how to best deal with threats. One way or another, this problem is getting solved.

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Sirius is attending Hogwarts. This was never a matter of discussion. It's not optional now, either, for all that he can't see how House Black can get out of this mess with as many members as it had coming in. He will go to Hogwarts, come what may. Arcturus' support will only allow so much.

That is all well and good, but Itachi absolutely *cannot* go to Hogwarts, if it will mean leaving Regulus to live in that house, without Itachi to keep him safe. So—Where does that leave him? Sirius must go to Hogwarts, Itachi cannot go, and Regulus—

Arcturus would have already invited them to move to Castle Black, should he have wished to. Moreover, neither Sirius nor Regulus had met another member of House Black, past Lord and Lady Black—and their parents, of course. That has to mean something.

His best guess is that Sirius, and to a lesser extent Regulus, are poisoned chalices. His magic and competence appear to be valuable but his loud rebellion against his life-givers at age nine marks him as dangerous. If he could turn against his mother so wholly, why wouldn't he turn on a distant aunt or cousin? In the back of everybody's mind, a thought rattles. Yes, he's a genius. A prodigy even. There are other Black children. It wouldn't be so bad if this one—stopped being. Nobody wants to be the one that made the Black genius *cease*, and they would all strike that person down, but it would be an acceptable loss.

Itachi is familiar with this situation; he's been here before. The same thing played out after Shisui died and he moved his conflict with Fugaku in the open. His family would've slept better with him *removed*, but they couldn't brave the consequences of removing the rightful heir of the Clan. Even if they could have managed it.

(He would have let them, he thinks. He knows. If but one person snuck into his rooms at night with a poisoned blade, he'd have welcomed the chance to rest.)

"What do you think, Kreacher," he asks in the end. "We cannot stay here. I'd sooner burn the house down than let Regulus live here, without me."

"You must leave," says Kreacher, voice pitched so low it sounds like rustling leaves. He's just as upset as Regulus is, but not for the same reason. After all the decades and centuries, he's well and truly used to violence. It's Sirius's transformation to Itachi that pains and frightens him. Regulus accepts his changed mannerisms without a blink, with endless grace and love. Kreacher is nowhere near as sanguine.

"We must leave, dear," corrects Itachi. "But where?"

The reply is immediate and certain. "Castle Black. Lord Black will not turn you away."

"Will he not?" Itachi is not certain. "I think he might. Having us around for a few hours every week is not the same as being our primary guardian."

"Lord Black cares for you. He need not get involved more, he need just give you a room to sleep in."

And if Orion and Walburga weren't dipping their toes in the insanity pool, Itachi might have agreed. The more unhinged the two grow, the less predictable they become. Walburga would perhaps honour the sanctity of Castle Black. Orion might not.

“It’s hardly just a place to sleep,” says Itachi. “My Hogwarts letter will arrive soon, and that will be a thrown gauntlet, I think. From then on, we have a little under a year, to make things official. A year is a long for me, but not for the Government. And we will be laughed outside of the Ministry if we tried to declare Heir Black as an unfit guardian without some serious backing.”

Kreacher to his credit thinks on his words carefully. After a few moments of pause, he sighs. “Kreacher understands—I understand. You don’t trust the Lord to fight for you. Can we make him do so?”

“I don’t know that we can.” It is not an easy thing to admit. “There is not a lot that we can do. Magically, politically, and financially, he’s got us firmly under his thumb. The most we could hope for is magical independence if we get ourselves disinherited. The alternative hardly bears thinking about. If the Ministry got its paws on two Black children, they would auction us off to the highest bidder, we both know that. So, I would leave deliberate disinheritance only as the last resort.”

He knows that he would leave, he just desperately doesn’t want to. He’s been Clan-less once, and he would do a lot to not be again.

Kreacher shivers violently. “We run only for our lives, young Master. Only ever for our lives.”

“A fine Shinobi sentiment, appropriate for a Shinobi guardian.”

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“Force won’t work, but why not blackmail,” muses Regulus, from his spot on Itachi’s belly. The two of them retreated to their ultimate comfort spot, a pile of pillows and blankets in front of a large fireplace.

God, this topic. “Blackmail is. Complicated.” Itachi says. “It’s not a winning strategy. At best it’s a stop-gap measure, and even then it’s a volatile situation. You create an enemy for life and leave him space and time to plot against you. If it came to that, I’d sooner go with assassination than blackmail.”

A tone of morbid interest sneaks into Regulus's dry tone. "Who would you even assassinate, in this situation?"

"Orion," replies Itachi without a pause. "That would solve a lot of problems. Orion is Heir Black, and Walburga has power through him. If he's out of the picture, the Heirship doesn't revert to her, it goes to the next male heir in line."

"Just one measly assassination," says Regulus, lips twisting. "Going back to saner waters, perhaps blackmail isn't a good option, but bribery? Proactive bribery? We would only corner Grandfather enough to force a decision."

Forcing a decision sounds like a terrible idea to Itachi. There is a measure of control in working with the situation as it is and redirecting it in small, discrete increments. Forcing a decision means loud consequences that are difficult to shift, after the fact.

"What would we bribe him with, then?"

Regulus hums, deep in thought. "I think Grandfather needs an excuse to name you Heir Black. He wants to already; he loves you like you were his son, a fact made more obvious by the lack of love he has for Orion."

Itachi makes a noncommittal sound. Regulus is yet an itty-bitty Black, somehow still overwhelmingly good. He won't burst any bubbles here, but Arcturus doesn't love Itachi—Sirius. He is fond of him at the absolute most.

"He won't name me Heir, I am too young. I cannot do the admin duties, and you cannot do them for me."

"Here's an idea. You will be getting your wand soon. If you perform some flashy magic and cement your position as this prodigy genius, then you have some legitimate bargaining power. You could threaten to leave and join a different family; Merlin knows every Dark

House would snap you up in a moment. Then I will mention a very reasonable, not at all extreme method of resolution and bam, we win."

Itachi hums, morose. It's a good plan, in its simplicity. Things are never so simple. There is a human element in this wretched mess that Regulus isn't accounting for.

With that said, it is *a* plan, and Itachi certainly doesn't have a better one. If worst comes to worst, they run. Itachi will remove himself from Hogwarts, and he and Regulus can hide out for a year or two in the woods. Their vaults are theirs, irrespective of their inheritance. They will live there until it's Regulus's time to go to Hogwarts, and Itachi can sit his OWL's in the Ministry. After Regulus graduates, they can jump this cursed ship and emigrate to Cuba.

Easy.

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Contrary to Itachi's wishes, November third is a beautiful, sunny day. For six weeks, he fumes, it's been raining non-stop. For six weeks, and now—sunny. When is it even sunny in November in England?

"The crowds," he moans miserably to Kreacher. "We will be drowned by people."

The room they've coopted as theirs is filled with texts. Recently, Regulus has—to nobody's surprise—been keenly interested in politics. Wizarding texts on politics are rather primitive things, but the Muggles, the Muggles came up with ideas that blew Itachi's mind. If he wasn't as busy as he was, he'd be neck-deep in political theory. The sheer number of abstract thinkers is staggering. His task, sadly, is too important to shunt away.

"Indeed," Kreacher's voice is grim, every bit as displeased as Itachi is. He detests crowds, especially for Itachi's first Outing.

Today his letter will be arriving. There are a few hours yet to go, but Castle Black is aware of the day and its significance. The row with Orion was especially explosive yesterday, so their

retreat to Castle Black was well received. The man's insults have grown less and less inspired, the longer it takes him to truly hurt Itachi in any way. Which, considering the man doesn't know him from Merlin, is not surprising. Walburga is a far craftier opponent, there. She knows how to wound a person; arguments with her usually end with a swift retreat on Itachi's part, before things turn—complicated.

"Cheer up, brother," says Regulus, eyes wide and manic. Neither one of them had a wink of sleep the previous night, too excited (Regulus), wary (Itachi) and long-suffering (Kreacher) to manage. "It's an opportunity. Grandfather will escort us, after all, and he will enjoy showing you off. You just need to look like a Pureblood prodigy and we're golden."

Itachi groans, flopping back into his pillows. "Crowds, Regulus. Masses of strangers gawking and whispering and existing in my space. The noise, brother; the hubbub."

"Tosh," says Regulus. "I am the one with the aversion to crowds. You are just a snob."

"Miserable misanthrope, thank you very much," he throws back. "Also a snob but I don't see how that applies. I have no issue with the relative wealth of the masses. I just don't want to be in them."

"A wand, 'Tachi," snaps Regulus, fed up with the moaning. "A proper wand, and almost a full year to use it without supervision."

"Don't call me that," says Itachi, not for the last time. "And yes, a wand will be fascinating to use. I might even figure out why wizards are so obsessed with them."

"I will call you Itachi when you're Itachi, and Sirius when you're Sirius," says Regulus, like every other time. "And you better choose a wand that accepts me too. I will not be waiting another two years before I start with wanded-magic."

Itachi stifles a yawn. "I will leave it to you to make your case to Lord Ollivander. Perhaps you can make up for the fact that you tried to bodily shake his Heir at your Presentation."

“That little brat,” mutters Regulus. “Thank Circe he won’t be in my year. I can’t imagine sharing classes with the smug little cretin.”

“Now, now,” smirks Itachi. “Just because Heir Ollivander doesn’t think Arithmancy is the endpoint of all knowledge doesn’t make him a brat.”

“It absolutely does,” declares Regulus. “And it always will. For an *Ollivander* to disparage the field of Arithmancy is, is, immoral. Indecent. Reprehensible.”

Itachi throws his hands back, arching into a stretch. “I pity your Head of House, I really do. As a matter of fact,” he pauses, shivering in delight as his spine pops. Pop-pop-pop-pop. Delicious. “—I pity your future spouse. It must be disheartening to know your heart will always belong to science.”

“As if that will be the sticking point. You realise whoever marries me will have to live with both of us? While I might be a delight, you are a menacing, brooding elitist. Never mind me, I pity the fool who tries to court you.”

“True,” yawns Itachi. “We will remain eternal bachelors, then. You, me and Kreacher, haunting Castle Black until the end of our days. I can think of worse fates.”

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The letter arrives so conveniently at the end of breakfast, that Itachi is certain there is some magic involved, there. Regulus barely contains himself from screeching and diving for the damn thing, only kept in place by Lady Melania’s steely gaze.

“Congratulations, my boy,” says Arcturus. Itachi raises his eyes, surprised by the man’s uncharacteristically emotional tone. Indeed, the man is positively misty-eyed.

“Thank you, Grandfather,” he says cautiously. He doesn’t need an emotional outburst now, especially since it’s unclear why the man is so emotional at all. Merlin’s mercy, he’s more choked up now than he was when discussing his son’s potential murder.

“Open it,” hisses Regulus, weathering the disapproving ‘tut’ from Lady Black with aplomb.

Alright, alright.

The envelope is made out of lovely, thick paper, and the wax seal is amusingly large and irreverent. A badger, a snake, a lion and a raven, and not a single depiction was chosen for dignity or grace. The lion is chubby, the raven is missing quite a few feathers, the badger is cross-eyed, and the snake is tied into a knot.

“I am warning you,” whispers Regulus.

He opens the damn thing, carefully not breaking the seal.

Dear Mr Black

…

He scans the formulaic words and hands the thing off to Regulus without a comment. There are exactly two interesting pieces of information there. The Headmaster is a figure of great renown, and he is Light, or he would have been talked about in their household at length. Interesting. In Konoha, Academy instructors were paltry Shinobi, or, in the vanishingly rare case, handicapped Shinobi who somehow made it out alive. This Albus Dumbledore sounds like a Hokage more than he sounds like a schoolteacher.

He glances through the second page; banalities for the most part—uniforms, books, equipment for classes and so on.

If not for the interesting question about his new Headmaster, he’d find the whole affair dreadfully underwhelming.

“Pardon me, Grandfather,” he says in a mild tone. “The sheer length of titles the Headmaster has—do they all point to actual political positions the man holds, or are they ceremonial in nature?”

The light in Arcturus’s eyes dims slightly. “I wish that were the case. No, Albus Dumbledore is a formidable man. He holds almost every important Political position we have.” He pauses for a bit before a cynical smile curls his lips. “Well, except that of the Minister of Magic, of course.”

Right. Every position except the one filled by the biggest dullard the Wizengamot can find.

“That’s—interesting.”

“Who? Oh, Dumbledore,” says Regulus, torn from his detailed inspection of the letter. “I’ve read about him. He’s a fascinating man. Wait—you’ve read about him too! He was the one who defeated Lord Grindelwald a while ago. The transfiguration Master, remember?”

“Oh.” A displeased frown appears on his face. “The flashy one.”

Arcturus barks a laugh. “You’d be wise to keep such thoughts to yourself, Sirius. Dumbledore is revered in most places. The second coming of Merlin, come call him.”

Itachi shrugs. “I can respect his achievement while disparaging his methods. Transfiguration is just about the least combat-oriented discipline I could name. He’d be better served with Herbology.”

Regulus rolls his eyes. “I will not sit through another one of those rants, brother. Transfiguration is a fine field, and you always go on about playing to your strengths. Well, Dumbledore is a Transfiguration Master. Why wouldn’t he use his best skill?”

“Useless skill,” Itachi mutters but lets it go. “Setting aside the Headmaster’s achievements, admirable though they undoubtedly are, how are we going about this? I assume we can get

most of the supplies at Diagon?”

Crowded, dismal Diagon.

“Indeed,” says Arcturus. “We will leave presently. My love, are you joining us?”

“Unfortunately not,” says Lady Black. “I find the atmosphere in the Alleys to be—stifling in these times.”

“Of course. Well, children, to the floo. The address is,” he pauses and sighs minutely. “The Leaky Cauldron. Don’t make me repeat the horrid name.”

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# Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Diagon

Itachi eyes the filthy, rickety mess of a bar with horror. It's dingy even by Konohan standards; by *missing-nin* standards. A fugitive murderer he might have been, but he frequented elegant tea houses. This *establishment* has black goo drooping from the ceiling, a floor that sticks to his shoes, and air that makes his eyes sting. Only tradition has the power to force snooty Pureblood aristocrats to enter Diagon through this pit instead of, say, Gringotts.

Nevertheless, he sends a shocked look Arcturus's way, earning himself a grimace in return.

"It has to be done the once. Come on, let's leave this place before we catch the plague."

Regulus, true to form, is craning his head to see everything. The patrons of the pub quieted when the Blacks arrived; by now, every eye in the room is trained on them. Which, considering what an eclectic collection of eyes it is, is apparent.

Itachi surpasses a shudder and blanks his face, body falling into a languid stance.

Onwards.

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The entrance itself is fairly amusing: a puzzle opened only with the use of a wand. Why they thought the puzzle is necessary is anyone's guess. It's not like a muggle could even see the pub.

It's probably another tradition. Or the puzzle was there first, and then they built the pub around it.  He wouldn't even be surprised if the puzzle was there and they built *Diagon* around it. Wizards are, as a species, beyond understanding.

The alley is unforgettable. Itachi has spent this life in the Magical world; magic itself isn't as surprising. But the whimsy of this place is enough to take his breath away. The street is relatively narrow, with dozens of colourful shops on either side. The noise is almost deafening, hundreds of voices raised in conversation. Every storefront is as magical as you can please, with flashing signs, flying wares, and colour-changing doors.

Arcturus twitches and squares his shoulders. "Keep close, children."

His warning is, as it happens, entirely unnecessary. The Black Lord is infamous enough that the crowd parts around them. A hush falls on their immediate surrounding, and furious whispers follow in their wake.

"I take it you're not a frequent visitor either, Grandfather," says Regulus under his breath. His voice is impressively even, considering his Pureblood mask is cracking with stress.

Arcturus sweeps through the alley, steps long but measured, deceptively fast for all that he looks unhurried. "I am not, no."

"I can see why." Itachi decides to follow Arcturus' example and adds a hint of prowl to his movements. The suffocating feeling of people gawking at him like a circus animal brings back the taste of copper and the sound of distant screams to his mind. When he's tangibly more Uchiha than Black, these things are closer to the surface than they should be.

"Ollivander's first," says Arcturus evenly. "Then the uniform. Your elf can get the rest. We don't need to spend any more time here than we have to."

Regulus sloops in both gratitude and disappointment.

“Don’t worry, we will explore some more when it’s less busy,” Itachi soothes while keeping his body language as threatening as possible without crossing into vulgarity.

“It’s for the best,” says Regulus. “It’s not like there is anything here that we don’t already have.”

“Except wands. And apparently robes.”

“School uniforms,” Regulus corrects with a wicked little smile. Itachi grimaces. School uniforms at his age, Hecate help him.

“Right.”

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Lord Ollivander is as odd as he remembers him to be. Hyuuga eyes gaze at them, seeing both more and less than his Sharingan had, once. If not for the pupil being present, he’d have launched a *thorough* investigation into the House of Ollivander. As it is, it is one more pang of otherness to add to this day.

“Merry meet.”

Lord Olivander’s voice suits his aesthetic, wispy and airy and, possibly, false. There was nothing airy or wispy about little Alcott Ollivander, white eyes notwithstanding. So, either this behaviour is a by-product of wand wand-making business or a deliberate choice to unnerve.

“Merry meet,” echo the Blacks, cascading their greetings—a nod, a shallow bow, and Regulus tops it off with a full bow.

“A wand for young Master Black, then? Well, step forward, let us begin. I hope this will be an interesting one. Wand arm?”

“I am ambidextrous, my Lord,” replies Itachi, keeping an even face as the man stares at him unblinkingly for a long series of minutes.

“Indeed, indeed. I daresay we will have to take a few steps back. No, the usual method would be too simple. No, no, *no*.” He trails off while swooping around the shop without rhyme or reason. “Let us start at the basics.”

“Here we go.” He ambles back with four boxes of varying lengths and widths. “To start with.” He punctuates his words by placing the respective box on the table. “Rowan,” a slim box. “Hawthorn,” a slightly wider, shorter box. “Oak,” about the width of the first one, and significantly longer than either, “Adler,” widest one yet, and less than an inch shorter than the previous one.

“Give them a feel.” The Lord hesitates for a moment, unseeing eyes gaining a little bit of focus. “However, just in case—” He waves his wand, and a wide panel of wood inscribed with thousands of tiny runes glides from the back room. “Aim there, why don’t you.”

Izanami, but this is ridiculous. With an internal despairing sigh, he opens the first box. A flash of displeasure storms through him and he drops the offended instrument hastily.

“No, no, I thought not. Not with the—”

Not with the what, you old frog?

“Never mind that. Moving on, moving on.”

Slightly wary now, he touches the second wand. It’s less smooth, with visible knots and twists in the wood, but the general shape of it is relatively similar; the handle is simple in design, without any additional ornaments, or unusual additions.

So far so good; no pain, no nothing. The wand sits inertly in his hand until he points it at the panel and twirls it into a circle. A screech of wind and a deep cut cuts into the panel. Runes flash, and the damage smoothes itself out without issue. Interesting.

"No, no, not that. Very interesting—I would have thought—No, well, no sense in whinging about it."

The wandmaker is in his own world, and the fact that Itachi knows he won't explain his maddening mumbles makes him that much more annoying.

"Next, next, come on now." The wandmaker loses more and more of his Pureblood manners, the longer the process goes. Arcturus doesn't blink an eye, which means allowances are made for *déformation professionnelle*.

He picks up the third one. This one he recognises. Oak. Konohan woods were all synthetically made; Hashirama grew them himself. As such the trees were all clones of the same species—later named Hashirama trees. Outside of the immediate surroundings, however, there was a lot of Oak. The wand is smooth and as plain as the rests, if longer.

Unless he's very mistaken, Ollivander's approach is more systematic than it appears. So, for the sake of limiting the variables as much as possible, he replicates the same movement as before.

A rather confused blob of light emits from the tip of the wand, not too bright or decisive.

"Oooooh, interesting," warbles the wandmaker. "Oh, yes, yes, *of course*. Yes, I should have known."

He yanks the wand from his hand and doesn't even let him try the final wand.

“Oh, yes, yes, yes.” He chants to himself, with a little hop in his step. “Yes, yes, yes.”

He comes back with another six wands.

“Oh yes, yes, now these. Oak, Holly, Redwood, Sequoia, Cherry, Beech. Come on, come on.”

Itachi sighs. This will be a painful process, he can just tell

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The bewildering process takes—hours. Whatever esoteric measures the maniac uses, they are very much unclear to Itachi. The wandmaker went through everything—wood type, length, carving style, flexibility, everything.

After a little while, he mostly stopped verbal communication at all, and just got stranger and stranger, laughing, murmuring, oohing and aching at random times. He’d exclaim random words such as ‘horn’ or ‘reservoir’ but other than that, there was no actual meaning to his words.

“Now, this.” After digging through the store for a specific box, he lays it in front of Itachi with great satisfaction. Some of the madness has vanished from his eyes, and he seems more settled;  anticipatory but certain.

Apprehensive, but undeniably curious, Itachi opens the box and looks over the wand.

It’s dark red, a shade or two deeper than blood, and gnarly. The wood is inlaid with a mineral of some sort, metallic-grey but speckled with gold. It’s, visually speaking, a beautiful piece; one that Itachi would rather display than use. It’s significantly shorter than the rest perhaps eight inches in total, with a comfortable-looking handle, and barely a pommel to speak of.

The air of anticipation is heavy in the air, and Arcturus and Regulus, who have long since lost interest, lean forward.

Some subconscious feeling they all share tells them: this is it.

He picks up the lovely instrument. It's not joy or elation that spreads through him, but a firmness; certainty mixed with a grim species of determination. He swishes it, and a stream of blue-white fire flows out of the tip, disappearing before it hits the ground.

"Perfect! Yes, of course!" He looks at the wand with pride and satisfaction. "A paradoxical wand, yes, but also not at all. An omen of the passage of time, perhaps."

"Pardon," Itachi asks, distracted. Important intel or not, the Shinobi part of him is horrified by the obsessive connection of a wizard and wand forming inside of him. At the same time, the wizard part of him sighs in satisfaction. It's *teamwork*; a partnership. The wand is sentient, living, and willing to work with him, within reason.

"It is undoubtedly a perfect match, but a surprising one," says Olivander, eyes finally focused on this plane. "I would not have thought to match this wand with a child of eleven."

A sort of resigned amusement settles around Itachi's shoulders like a well-fitting cloak.

"Why," asks Arcturus. Regulus just catches his eyes and smiles slightly a pained but supportive smile.

Ollivander turns to face him. He'd rather be talking to the Lord than Itachi.

"The core was clear from the beginning—it is Phoenix feathers or nothing for young Sirius. The wood, however, is—ah. Cherry wood is interesting on its own, but this wand wasn't happy with how flexible and whippy the wood was. It demanded an inlay; a fortification if you will. Inlaid wands aren't extremely rare, but I don't often sell them to children. Children

rarely need them. For Adults, yes, third or fourth wands tend to require added complexity. But this wand wouldn't budge until it got its hematite inlay."

White eyes skitter to Itachi's and the well of curiosity and otherworldly insight is heavy to bear. "I do not envy your life, past, present or future, but I will follow it with great interest."

"Thank you," interrupts Arcturus firmly, eying the odd wand with a little well-hidden curiosity. "What do we owe you."

A mischievous smirk flashes over Ollivander's features. "Seven galleons, as it is for every first wand." The man hums a low laugh but doesn't offer any further commentary

What exactly is so funny, nobody has any time to care.

"Do you have a wand holster," he asks before the Lord has finalised the transaction.

"Oh no, not here. Goodness, I am no leather worker. Permit a warning, if you will. That wand will not let itself be housed in inferior work. You will have to match the leather to its liking, or suffer the consequences."

"I know just the place," says Arcturus with a pleased little smile. His Grandfather knows more about Itachi's wand than Itachi does. It would be best to let Regulus squeeze the information out of the man in his own time. There is not a single adult alive who could resist his brother's earnest thirst for knowledge.

"Merry part," murmurs the wandmaker, disappearing to the back of his store without giving them time to respond.

Regulus, who has been suspiciously quiet for a while now, hums noncommittally. "I don't think it would suit me at all, brother."

He thinks about the gnarly, fierce wand. “No, I don’t think it would.”

Arcturus falls into the practised, cold persona easily. “It would be best not to give it the chance to disfigure you, child. I don’t know what to think about it, myself. A very old, very particular wand has chosen you, Sirius. I need to think about what that means.”

“I am very old and particular, obviously,” says Itachi. Regulus huffs out a pseudo-laugh but doesn’t comment.

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The rest of the trip is conducted in a brisk and efficient manner. All three are deep in their thoughts, wondering as to the odd experience with the wandmaker. They only have the robes and the uniforms to buy, and then they can retreat.

The robe shop is a predictable affair. Their name and galleons see them ushered into a private sitting room. Arcturus, expression grim and determined, goes into the fray. Itachi’s input is blessedly unnecessary; his measurements were taken magically, and the two brothers are left to wait while the adults determine appropriate colours and materials.

Which is the perfect opportunity to consider the matter of his wand. The wand, Itachi considers, should not have taken him so surprised. His wilful ignorance rose, as it often did, to bite him. His disdain for wands blinded him.

Magic isn’t Chakra, he repeats over and over again, hoping to remember it this time. Foci for Chaka might have been crutches for those unwilling to learn control, but wands were beings unto themselves. He feels his wand physically, senses its energy and how it interlocks with his own and produces something different. It’s not mysticism, it’s observable fact. He’s attuned to his own body enough to know that the amalgam of wood, stone and phoenix is alive and has its own thing going on, quite irrespective of Itachi.

It’s honestly a wild concept. Magic is still as inexplicable now as it was when he started learning about it. The force itself is sentient, the source of it is unknowable and incomprehensible, and the results are fantastical. He should just accept it and move on. Somehow.

“I think I understand wizards a bit better,” he tells Regulus under his breath. “I would overreact if someone destroyed my wand.”

His brother looks at him with too-wise eyes. “I anticipated a similar reaction. You love fiercely, brother, and it’s natural that love will extend to your wand. I daresay you won’t find it as easy to destroy them, now.”

Itachi blinks. “It depends, perhaps. Any wand that lets itself be wielded by a worm like Orion Black deserves to be burnt, either because it’s wormish in its own right, or because it should be put out of its misery.”

“Not a bad point. Ruthless, and a bit unfair, but not bad. Would you consider the wand to be responsible? Do you think it has a say in its use?”

Hmm. Good question. He focuses on the cherry wand, reaching out with his mind. The response he gets—the very fact that he gets a response, no matter how alien—is fascinating. It feels—old. Old and wise, and more than anything else, hard. “This one does.” He replies with ironclad certainty. “It’s older than me, smarter than me, and worlds more certain than me. It would turn on me before it would let me disgrace ourselves.”

“Your pronouns are rebelling,” says Regulus, voice Suna-dry. “But your point is made. I have to think about it.”

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School uniforms are a different animal altogether. The only shop that has the license to sell them is Madam Malkin’s Robes for all Occasions—a decidedly middle-class establishment, and one that they are all aware Blacks have only visited to buy uniforms and nothing else.

The atmosphere is, frankly, stifling. Not because of the store itself—if Itachi wasn’t a Black, he would enjoy it infinitely more than the pretentious twattishness of before. With that said, it’s clear nobody here likes them, they are all afraid of them, and can’t wait to see their backs.

The workers are as professional as you could hope, but the young ladies' hands tremble when it's time for measurements to be taken.

Itachi would consider some attempt to set them at ease if he wasn't himself drowning in discomfort. He doesn't think himself to be body-shy exactly. That does not make standing on a stool barely dressed, in front of complete strangers is not damn uncomfortable.

The uniforms are ostensibly unmarked, even though everyone and their cat know Sirius Black is headed for Slytherin. There are nine months to go until Hogwarts starts, so the fitting room, at least, is empty but for his skinny self and his brother who is barely keeping his sniggers hidden. Itachi knows his face is frozen in a mask of horror, but there is only so much he can handle.

As soon as the fitting is done, they arrange the damn things to be picked up via house-elf, and finally it's time to go.

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# Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Preparation

Practising wanded magic is like nothing he's ever imagined. Wandless magic is polite enough to let him blur the lines between magic and Chakra for his peace of mind. It's belief, in the end, willpower, and he has plenty of belief about his Shinobi training.

Wanded magic is a different animal altogether. First, there is the matter of his wand and its energy that is strong enough to acknowledge, while too alien to know what to do with. The only thing that keeps him somewhat productive is that the wand is capable—and, for now, willing—to join their energies itself.

The 'spell' aspect of casting makes no sense. The theory is more or less straightforward. Every spell is a miniature ritual—the wand-movements and the incantation are shorthand. In this, his experience in Ninjutsu is to his benefit. With practice and an awareness of Chakra flow and movement, it is possible to shave off hand-signs one by one. They're just crutches, tricks to channel just the right amount of Chakra, combined with specific intent at the right intervals. Spells, as he understands them, are much the same. After enough practice, his magic will learn what to do without the crutches. In this, his long experience with meditation and precise body-mastery is to his benefit.

So, he has the theory down, and the willpower. The problem is the belief. The whole process is just so *silly*. The incantations are a butchering of Latin, on the other side of wrong. Some idiot at some point thought twisting a perfectly serviceable word into gibberish would be the funniest thing in the world—and it *stuck*. If things were different, he'd be booking it to a country with a little more common sense. Egypt, for example; he heard excellent things about Egypt. Amaterasu above.

Without belief, even his wand can't make up the difference. If he could, he'd skip spellwork altogether, and focus on finding material that took itself a little more seriously.

And Charms were hardly the worst of it. The less said about transfiguration the better. While wizards might think there is something useful in transfiguring mice into teacups, it just seemed like the product of a disturbed mind. That the textbooks explained the effects of a badly done transfiguration could include a furry, squeaking teacup was enough to send him into a full-blown stupor.

Even Regulus couldn't understand how repulsive the idea is. What unholy hell does he send the mouse into when he transfigures it into a cup? Is it a cup? Is it an illusion of a cup? Where does the animal's consciousness go? Is it still alive, when it's halfway between a mouse and a cup? How? Does it breathe? Where are its organs? Do the pain receptors work without a physical brain?

Inanimate to animate, alright, the theory more or less makes some sense. The result is not truly alive, it's a simulacrum of life. An automaton, powered by his magic, which would revert to its original state when he stops feeding it magic. But animate to inanimate is depraved. Animals think. They feel. They know fear and pain and love. It must be agonising to be on the receiving end of that horror; to be stuck, a cup-shaped mouse, helpless and afraid. That the Leader of Light is an accomplished transfiguration master doesn't say good things about this wretched society.

It's entirely possible Itachi, who has lived the life he had and had his soul manipulated even in death, was taking this a little too personally. He is aware of this and is taking it into account. This doesn't change the fact that the first person who instructs him to inflict unimaginable horrors on an innocent animal will find themselves lacking fingers, eyes and a tongue.

He banishes the thoughts of bloody murder with, admittedly, some effort, and focuses on The Plan. Regulus is scheming on his own and had told him in no uncertain tones to worry about his part of the plan and let him do the politicking.

His part of the plan, in this case, is to come up with a sufficiently impressive bit of magic to perform. Regulus is in charge of bullying Grandfather into hosting an event. Then, if everything works out as it should, Itachi would perform some suitably impressive feat of magic, cement his place as a prodigy and force Grandfather to take them in.

As for the bit of magic, the outline is more or less clear. It has to be sensory magic; something the audience can see or hear or touch. It has to be impressive in itself; he can't just

do something the adults find trivial, like a conjuration spell. No, no, it has to be something as good or better than they can do.

His ‘Shinobi magic’ as they had started calling it, is an option. The absolute last option, because he is not going to sacrifice the element of surprise that easily, but it’s an option. Wizards don’t fly unaided, they don’t bother much with enhancing their bodies or using them in any way other than spell casting and shields. He could try some acrobatic display of skill. His body is hardly trained, but he can whip it into shape in time if he tries hard enough.

So far, he hasn’t had much luck in the entry-level texts, but he has about six months left, so he’s not too worried. They still live in the London house for the most part, without leaving their rooms at all. They visit Castle Black on occasion, but for the most part, they’re left alone.

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A beautiful piece of defensive magic catches Itachi’s eye. It’s *perfect*.

Well, not perfect. It’s still charm, but one without any special wand-movements, and with effects that he can wholeheartedly believe in, so it can be forgiven.

The Patronus charm makes sense. If there is one thing that comes easily to Itachi, it’s a desire to protect someone brother-shaped. Now, a Patronus charm is ‘officially’ performed by keeping a happy memory firmly in your mind and summoning your spirit animal. A big barrel of nonsense, is what Itachi thinks of *that* idea. A happy memory would maybe suffice for a child. Children barely have the emotional capacity to feel anything past the base emotions, which they feel very, very strongly. But Itachi is firmly middle-aged, soul-wise, and he knows that if you want a protector, you damn well need to want to protect. After a lifetime of Sasuke sprinting headfirst at the strongest monster he can find, he knows very well how strong the wish to protect someone can be.

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Some five months before the deadline, Regulus manages to swindle Arcturus and Melania into throwing a party for Itachi, to celebrate his going to Hogwarts. More importantly, Arcturus has agreed to invite the extended family: his siblings, Cassiopeia, Alphard and

Dorea, his cousin Phollux, nephew Cygnus and grand-nieces,  Narcissa and Bellatrix. A good bit of the family is missing, still, but Itachi will be more than happy with this batch, should it all work out. And, naturally, he is also obliged to invite the assorted Dark Purebloods.

What luck, Itachi will perform magic like a show-poodle in front of Lord fucking Riddle. He knows the terrible man will be laughing at him throughout.

Eyes on the prize, he reminds himself. If you manage to pull this off, you will be free of the vermin who call themselves your parents. Just focus.

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The spell itself is not the problem, but the energy requirements are steep. He hasn't trained whatever nebulous part of his body channels (or produces?) magic. He hadn't needed to. Unfortunately, the Patronus Charm is created for adults with grown-up bodies who can handle the strain. Itachi is a scrawny under-fed eleven-year-old.

Some light experimentation tells him he has about one attempt at casting the spell, before he wipes himself out so thoroughly, that he can only force down whatever protein-dense food Kreacher had chosen that day, and clock out for the day.

Right, then. The first stage of the plan is clear. He needs to increase his magical reserves. Fair enough, that shouldn't be too complicated.

The actual practice of the Patronus charm is limited to once a week. The rest of the time, he divides his time evenly into three parts.

Part one is meditation. He would try to get a handle on his magic, open a line of communication with his wand, and in general work on training his mind to combine thought and feeling into a force of will. Part two is physical power. He's a firm believer in 'sound mind in a sound body." So the second part of his day is spent in elementary Taijutsu, working his way through simple Kata and letting his mind rest from the strenuous morning. Part three is casting. He doesn't have much magic to spare, but what he has, he uses up every day. The goal is to get comfortable with the feeling of magic rushing through his body. In theory, the more aware of it he is, the more efficient he can make it.

Progress is slow, yes, but there's plenty of time still. Since the party is meant to see Itachi—Sirius—off, it's set for the last Friday before the term starts, August twenty-seventh. It leaves them with no wiggle room, but booking it with their vault keys and Kreacher should still be possible. With enough incentive and some fast-talking Itachi is hopeful he can negotiate an Asylum with the Goblin Nation if it came to that.

With all that in mind, the deadline is close, but still far enough. Either way, there is no sense in hurrying—he's already working as hard as he physically can. He could perhaps cut down on sleep, which would see him crash long before it's time to perform. No, for now, he's doing everything he can.

There is dignity in that.

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He manages to produce a full-bodied Patronus about two weeks before the party.

It takes the form of the Susanō.

What.

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"Look at it this way, brother," says Regulus weakly, breaking the stunned silence. "It's going to impress everyone."

"You must not use it," says Kreacher. "Young Master, please. You must not reveal your strength. You summoned a shade of a God to do your bidding. Many would do much to bind that strength, to have it under their thumb."

“The thought has crossed my mind.” Itachi digs his knuckles into his temples, trying to knead his migraine into submission. “We’re out of options here.”

“We run,” says Kreacher, a note of hysteria entering his voice. “Better we run, and you are known to be a mad child, than for the entire world to want to use you.”

Fair point.

“Fair point,” he says. “Regulus, thoughts?”

“I say you use it,” he says firmly. “If you get named Heir Black you get protection. Legally, you’d be more or less untouchable. Politically, everybody would be less inclined to use you, and more inclined to court you to their side fair and square. You are already known to be a genius, people will already want to use you; this way you get the protections and not just the risks.”

“Another fair point.”

“Also,” adds Regulus. “The Patronus Charm is generally thought to be the epitome of Light magic. It's not, of course, it’s Dark magic, but the masses believe what they will. Showing that you can cast such a famously light charm will improve your image.”

“Kreacher?”

“All truths,” he admits. “And if you did not have a God-guardian, I would agree. But nobody has such. To have the Father of Storms as your Patronus is unthinkable.”

“Would anyone even know what Susanō-no-Mikoto represents,” asks Itachi, with genuine interest. He was shocked by the appearance of the Susanō, but, not as much as Kreacher. His Sharingan-summon was considerably more dangerous—a flaming Chakra-construct with an unblockable sword and the ability to seal away souls for all eternity. This Patronus-Susanō is

bathed in white-blue flames, yes, but it's much tamer, giving off none of the furious screaming anger that he's come to expect.

"All elves would," replies Kreacher instantly. "As well as any magical humans with a drop of creature blood in their lines. Father of Storms might not be our own, but we know of Him, as you know of Lady Hectate."

"How aware would they be," Regulus asks, quite reasonably in his opinion. "If they have a creature twenty generations back, they shouldn't be aware of the specific, they would just be wary, which is the point of the exercise."

Kreacher shakes his head. "I do not know. You might be right or you might be building a pedestal for yourself from which there is no climbing down."

"Give me a moment to think."

He closes his eyes and settles for a brief meditation session.

"The Patronus is almost impossible to change," he says after a few minutes. "I would have had to use it either way. Whatever the significance of the shape, the infamy is inevitable. It's better to use it to our benefit."

Kreacher bares his teeth. "Fine. But I will be there. Mark my words, the clever wizards will know the significance, and you will not live it down."

Itachi sighs and snags the elf into a cuddle. "It would happen now, or it would happen in two years. This way I can buy our safety. That's enough."

Regulus eels his way into the embrace. "It has to be."

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# Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everybody is taking the upcoming event seriously except for Itachi.

Well, that's not true. He is taking it *very* seriously, he just can't bring himself to focus on the fripperies. The Event is bafflingly politically charged, and he doesn't have the focus to spare. He had fobbed all the prep work to Reggie and Kreacher and focused on his bit. He can comfortably cast the Patronus and remain standing, which was a legitimate concern. Anything more than that—even so much as a Lumos charm—would wipe him out.

"I am not going to call you again, 'Tachi," says Regulus, sweet as poison. "I will just let you be late to the party we asked Grandfather to organise."

Itachi hums in acknowledgement and gives in. There will be not a moment of peace left. It's Friday, already, the semester starts on Wednesday, and while it feels like he has done nothing but prepare mindlessly for a full year, he still feels like they left everything to the last moment. Amaterasu preserve them.

"I'm yours, little brother," he says. "Command me as you will."

Regulus beams. "Excellent. Let's start with trousers, shall we? I was thinking—"

He listens to his brother's commands with half an ear and tries to soak in as much of the uncomplicated affection while he still can. Even if they somehow manage to pull this fool stunt off, the result will still be the two brothers separated for months, and Regulus left with Kreacher.

"I hate this," tumbles out of his mouth entirely without his control. "I hate being sent away, I hate having to scheme, plot and bleed, for such a paltry reward. I hate the thought of not having you near me. I hate—this."

Regulus freezes, shoulders tensing. His back is to Itachi, so he doesn't see his expression, but since it takes him a long sequence of heartbeats to turn around, it was nothing good.

"I—" Reg whirls around and tackles him as best he can, tucking his head into the crook of Itachi's neck.

Merlin wept, but he's such an idiot. "I'm—I'm sorry Reggie," he whispers. "I did not intend to upset you, I just—I don't know what I wanted. It doesn't matter."

"Shut up, 'Tachi. Crying is healthy," hiccups Regulus. "I read about it."

"Fair enough." He sighs. "I wish I could. I think I cried when—When Atlas died. But before that, I don't even know. When Shisui died, probably."

"You need to read more. Not just textbooks and war strategies, but novels. Fiction. It would do wonders for your sense of perspective."

Itachi smooths a fond hand down his brother's back, focusing on the frantic tempo of his heart. "My sense of perspective is just fine. The certainty that things can get worse is often what keeps me going."

Regulus warbles a wet laugh. "Right? You haven't murdered a person yet, and you're almost pushing twelve. You were, what, in the elite assassination squad by now."

"Pretty much." He is surprisingly unbothered by the mention of ANBU. "You say it like it's a bad thing, but the two years in ANBU were probably the best I've lived back then, discounting the toddler years. I had friends, there, comrades that watched my back. It was nice."

"And you just had to murder strangers gruesomely to earn that friendship."

If only that was the only thing, he thinks. Talk of murder is one thing, but there are a whole lot of less savoury things one might ask of a pretty little thing like Itachi, who would have—and have had—done anything and everything for his Hokage.

“You know I agree. The fact that my last life was terrible only makes me appreciate this world more.”

“We need to leave in ten minutes, silly children,” says Kreacher from the side. “You need to get ready.”

“Alright,” sniffles Regulus, and detaches from his spot under Itachi’s jaw. “Let’s go. Tonight is a piece of cake. I’ve organised everything. You just need to be you and amaze everyone with your God-summoning charm, and a lot of our worries will be solved.”

A lot but not all. Figures.

“Now, children.” Kreacher’s voice cracks like a whip, causing both of them to scramble up.

Yeah, okay.

***

The two of them—dressed and ready only by the grace of Kreacher’s magic—wait for their Grandparents to pick them up.

Regulus—or Kreacher—does have a head for fashion. The two of them are dressed head to toe in dark, smokey grey, Uchiha influence subtle but visible. The collar is dyed in a daring shade of indigo, matching the arrangement of the robes—a wide outer robe worn open, with loose sleeves ending just above their wrists. The blend of silk and linen works well; the fabric is exquisitely soft and has enough texture to hold the long, simple lines properly. Both of

them put their hair up in a simple bun, slightly too feminine to be the norm, but not so out there to be inappropriate. Underneath the robes, they wear narrow legging-like trousers dyed the same, dark indigo and a tunic with fabric woven in dark grey rhomboids. All in all, the only truly eccentric thing—other than the foreign influence—is the fact that their outfits are identical. Other than a small reduction in size in Regulus's case, the outfits could well have been charmed duplicates.

He doesn't know what the message is or who they're sending it to, but even he knows a statement when he sees one.

Lady Melania comes the closest she's ever come to expressing an unladylike show of emotion. At the very last moment, she manages to turn her snort into a tinkle of laughter. "Oh my, what lovely outfits. Regulus, darling, I suppose this is your doing?"

Regulus's grin is a calculated mix of politeness and irreverence. "Merry meet, Lady Black. Indeed it is. My brother, Goddess love him, would wear only the one thing if he could if it were comfortable enough."

Fair. Not, strictly speaking, true, but close enough for it not to matter.

"You certainly look memorable," says Arcturus. "Which was the point, I take it."

"I assume so," Itachi replies. "I wasn't involved." He breaks off, suddenly feeling uncertain about this. Did Regulus mention that Itachi will be doing magic in front of all these people? Surely he at least hinted at it?

"My Lord," he says in the end, caution audible in his voice. "About tonight—"

"No," interrupts Arcturus, a thoughtful but content expression making him look years younger. "Tell me nothing. I am not so old to be unable to see the rough shape of what you have planned. I am looking forward to the show, as well as the discussion afterwards."

Oh good. Itachi sends a small but honest smile at the older man. They're all more or less on the same page here.

"Do not worry yourself too much," says Arcturus. "Your efforts are commendable, and I would encourage being proactive. I didn't do so with my children, and you two are paying the price."

A confused rush of emotions courses through Itachi—gratitude, frustration, joy, rage. He forces it down, keeps his face more or less placid, and lets the storm pass. Arcturus is content to let him, and they spend a long couple of minutes in complete silence.

"Two minutes left," calls the Lady. "Cassie sent confirmation. Everybody is there, even Orion and Walburga. On the allies-front, Flint, Carrow, LeStrange, Malfoy, Nott, Rosier and of course, Riddle."

Showtime.

***

Regulus' formal act has improved by leaps and bounds. Itachi might have success in being menacing, but Regulus went a different route. With the aid of Lady Melania, he has crafted a flawlessly polite persona for himself. Lady Melania's influence is still apparent in the flow of impersonal good manners, but those details are easily ironed out.

As the guests of honour, they walk down the staircase, to low, polite applause.

The ballroom is decorated in grey and white, fitting amusingly well with their outfits. It's far too austere to have a *theme*, but there is beauty everywhere you look, for all that it is severe. A peach blossom here, a magical rose there. Fairies fly high above, and the music is accompanied by subtle visual effects, barely visible bursts of colour and abstract shapes emphasising the notes.

It's the height of elegance; Itachi's inner aesthete shivers in delight.

He knows better than to try escaping Lady Melania's well-manicured claws, so he lets himself be led from Black to Black, meeting the family he should have, by right, met years ago. Alas, he is not without blame, here. The family stayed away because Itachi declared war on Orion and Walburga. They kept their distance, not taking sides, as long as they could have. Now that Itachi—through Arcturus—forced their hands, they will no longer get to occupy the comfortable, fence-sitting position. Too bad, so sad.

The Blacks look eerily alike; off-puttingly alike, even. This is not to say they are not stunning, because they are. The women, especially, are a sight to behold.

Cassiopeia—'call me Aunt Cassie darling'—wears blood-red without a care, and leads the young man she brought to the event with the sort of cruel amusement where it's not clear who, exactly, the target of her ire is. It could be the family members that she's insulting by bringing her latest, barely legal, lover. It could just as easily have been the lover; being thrown into this particular shark pit is not anyone's idea of a good time.

Then there is Dorea, who brought her husband, a handsome, spindly man of Potter stock. Lady Dorea Potter nee Black is the polar opposite of Cassiopeia in almost every way. The only thing the sisters have in common is the way they wear confidence almost off-handedly like the alternative doesn't exist. That is where the similarities end. Where Cassiopeia was pushing the limits of what is possible to insinuate without see-through fabric and a whip, Dorea wore a floor-length dress-robe, the heavy dark-green satin falling to the floor without accentuating her shape in any way. Where Cassiopeia's lipstick matched the blood-red of her dress, trademark Black curls tumbling to the small of her back, Dorea wore no makeup, and her straightened hair was tied back into a low ponytail.

Charlus Potter is an interesting, and very much visually appealing, addition to the clutch of Blacks. Itachi has, to date, not met any Potters—a supremely wealthy merchant family that was only a couple of hundred years too late to be considered Ancient and Noble. He's read about them, plenty of them. The P's dominate the potions industry—Princes, Potters, Peverells. Quite a few Hitwizards were theirs as well as a fair few advocates. If Blacks were known for their wildness, beauty and insanity, Potters were known for their ingenuity, quickness of mind and fearless risk-taking.

All those traits were on clear display this night, as esteemed Lord Charlus Potter came to a Black event with a pleasant smile, dressed in a deep, burgundy red, outlined by burnished gold, flaunting his Gryffindor allegiance in the nest of snakes.

The only other male Black of interest was Alphard Black, Arcturus's brother. There were many things to note about the wizard, who obviously relished standing out from the crowd. Instead of dress robes in delicate fabrics and exquisite cuts, Alphard Black looks like a pirate. For all that Itachi knows, he might *be* a pirate. His outfit consists of leather, kept together by magic and determination. His black locks were coarse, he sported a beard (!) and an improbable amount of flashy, gold jewellery. This would be enough to make him stand out in this particular crowd even without his date.

His date is a slender man with improbably sharp cheekbones and almond eyes, wearing layered robes and an expression he could have seen on any dozen Yamanaka, colouring aside.

Itachi, who hasn't seen any wizards or witches from Asia, is shocked stupid. The man doesn't look like he came from the Land of Fire *exactly*, but miles closer than anyone else he'd seen so far. The black hair, the sharp jawline, the straight, narrow nose, the elegant mouth—the man dressed in a deep purple robe with outrageous orange accents could have been a Uchiha cousin.

His fascination with the man—Takeda Daigo-sama—is obvious, and Alphard—'Uncle Alph, lad'—thinks it's the funniest thing in the world. Understandable, all things considered, but irritating all the same. He's having enough trouble keeping his composure when faced with a beautiful man who likes to make daring sociopolitical commentary with his outfits.

Best skedaddle while it's still on the table. Somewhat hurriedly, Itachi marches away from that side of the family and focuses on the last batch. Namely Cygnus Black and his daughters, Bellatrix and Narcissa.

Narcissa Black, all of sixteen, stands next to her betrothed, Heir Lucius Malfoy who is himself only nineteen. Hadn't there been a scandal involving the two of them a few years back? He can recall scraps of a memory, little more than an impression. A broken betrothal, wasn't it? Or was it a rejection?

Bellatrix LeStrange, nee Black, is the Cassiopeia to Narcissa's Dorea, as violently beautiful as she is with everything else. Her husband of some years, Rodolphus LeStrange stands next to her, not the least bit enthralled by the vision of on his arm.

"Pay attention," hisses Regulus from his side. "Cygnus betrothed his daughters pretty much upon birth. More importantly, Bellatrix married the same day she graduated from Hogwarts. Rumour is that he is planning to do the same to Narcissa."

"Does Grandfather know?"

"He must. Everyone knows. I know and am nine."

Heavens wept, this family…

"We will monitor the situation and speak to Grandfather when our position is more stable."

Speaking of making his situation more stable. Where are—ah. There. His soon-to-be-ex guardians are chatting to Lord Yaxley, pretending that nothing at all is out of the ordinary. Itachi is mildly impressed at their audacity; he didn't think Orion had the presence of mind for such a bold play. As for the other Dark Purebloods, they are more or less content to remain in the corner for now. His eyes catch, as they so often do, on Lord Riddle. The man is lurking in the corner, expression frozen and magic restless. He must be bored half to death.

"My Lord, I see Lord Riddle," says Itachi in a deliberately casual voice, pitched loud enough to carry, but not enough to be vulgar about it. "I have to pay my respects. Regulus, Lord Flint is about to make a run for the Floo."

Tangibly amused by the unabashed theatricality, Grandfather bids them to go greet the lords. Itachi wastes no time and bows and nods his way through the throng of aristocrats standing between himself and Lord Riddle, murmuring the formulaic greetings with half a mind.

“Merry meet, my lord.” He bows low, adding a slight flourish for effect. He can probably afford some light irreverence. “I am delighted you’ve agreed to come. I admit I did not expect you to; not for something as petty as family drama.”

Lord Riddle looks, well, like a wolf among show-dogs, to be trite about it. His robes are more form-fitting than is the current fashion but are so perfectly tailored that he gives the impression of being above such things as observing the trends. Which, all things considered, he likely is. His magic, until then kept in a polite, forbidding clench around him, relaxes a little. Itachi has to fight to keep his own in control, which doesn’t go unnoticed. It’s hardly a shocking development; Sirius Black is the result of careful and painstaking selective breeding and medical engineering. His magic was hardly going to be *Light.*

“Young Sirius,” nods Riddle. “I have it on good authority that this event has generated more rumour than the Malfoy Yule Ball. Congratulations on your unexpected rise in social market value.”

Itachi huffs out a gentle, polite laugh, eyes scanning the room surreptitiously. Ah—there. Walburga Black has just turned this way. He adjusts his stance subtly, so his profile is perfectly visible and looks up at the lord with a guileless smile on his face.

A sharp smile pulls up Riddles’s smile until teeth poke through. “Now, now, little Black. Are you using me to score a point?”

Itachi blinks at the Lord with polite confusion, before letting calculation shade his eyes. “Indeed I am. I would apologise, but I doubt you mind. Instead, I will offer recompense. What might this humble heir offer you to facilitate a little petty revenge?”

If he’s not very wrong, and he rarely is, he’s judged his approach well enough: a little flattery, a little cynicism, and more honesty than the Lord is used to at these events. All true, all genuine, which makes it easy.

“Slughorn is going to have his hands full with you, little Black,” says Riddle, eyes glinting with—something. Amusement, perhaps, but mostly ruthless calculation. “That said, you are very amusing. I will allow it this time. I’m sure I will think of something I want in return.”

“An unsupervised, unrestricted access to the Black Library for a full day,” Itachi says. Owing an unspecified favour to a man like Lord Riddle is how children end up orphans and Noble Houses crash and burn. The orphan bit he could take or leave, but Grandfather is alright.

Riddle freezes for a fraction of a second; a truer reaction than most. “You don’t have the authority to offer any such thing.”

“Officially, not yet. Unofficially, I can get you in and out. The books are charmed to remain, but unless you run into my Grandfather—which never happens since he has his books brought to him—there won’t be problems.”

Riddle blinks again and nods. “You have a deal, little Black. With that said, someone needs to teach you how to negotiate. You don’t just offer the most valuable thing you have.”

This man would have made a good shinobi, Itachi thinks. Which makes him even more curious. Itachi’s first solution is invariably murder but he has family to keep him from outright villainy. Does Riddle have someone like that? The Rosier heir that gazes at him with boundless adoration, perhaps?

“The library is far from the most valuable thing I have,” he says. “It’s just the most valuable thing you would accept, without being paranoid about it.”

The corner of Riddle’s lip twitches up minutely. “Alright, little Black, you’ve driven Walburga up the wall, you can leave me be now. You have things to do tonight, I believe, that don’t involve pestering me.”

Itachi doesn’t grimace, but the twitch of his lips is enough of a tell for Riddle.

“I might be stalling,” he admits. He really should not speak so frankly with the most dangerous person he knows, but something in his brain wants the man to like him. The danger probably has something to do with it, to make matters worse; he felt the same about Hatake Sakumo,  Orochimaru and Nagato. “A part of the ‘plan’—” He puts extra emphasis on *plan*, “—Is for me to perform magic powerful enough that Lord Black will name me his heir.”

“Oh?” Riddle’s eyes sparkle with malicious amusement. “And will you?”

Itachi rolls his shoulders in a discrete shrug. “As humiliating as it will be to perform like a trained animal, I expect I will.”

“You’re a very amusing child,” Lord Riddle says after a moment’s pause. “Now, off with you. Go dazzle us with your magic.”

Itachi looks at the lord for a beat before a slow smile tugs his lips into a crooked, since smile.

“You think I can’t do it.” He feels his smile widening until his teeth peek out. “You think I will humiliate myself and sink my reputation by sending some coloured sparks in the air.”

“Yes,” Riddle says, voice conveying both confidence and delight. “With no formal instruction and an unsettled core, there is nothing you could do that would impress Lord Flint, never mind myself. I don’t know why you decided to compete in this arena, but I will enjoy your humiliation nonetheless.”

For some reason, this sends sparks of anticipatory glee down Itachi’s spine. He was dreading the spectacle, but now he wants nothing more than to wipe that smug, cruel smile off of Riddle’s face.

“Thank you, my lord,” he says. “Please, after I am finished, don’t leave without allowing me the chance to speak to you again.”

“Nobody can fault Blacks for confidence,” drawls Riddle. “As you wish, child.”

“Thank you, my lord. Merry part.”

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“Regulus,” he says. “Go inform Grandfather. Part two is a-go.”

“Really,” whispers Regulus. “I thought I’d have to drag you to do it.”

He can tell by the widening of Regulus’s eyes and the whispers of the onlookers that his expression is somewhat unhinged. “Lord Riddle looks forward to my embarrassing display of first-year magic.”

A small, contained smile lights up Regulus’s face. “Oh, that is fantastic. I do hope he has some creature blood in him.”

“It would not surprise me. There is something feral about the man. Creature inheritance would explain it.”

Regulus smirks before smoothing over his expression and straightening his posture.

“I will wait by the staircase.”

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“Please, if I may have your attention for a moment.” Grandfather’s voice is subtly amplified by a subtle Sonorus charm, just enough to be heard easily without being overbearing. The light buzz of conversation quietens, and all eyes turn to him.

“As you’re aware, this little soirée was organised to celebrate my grandson’s first term at Hogwarts. He has asked me for the honour of addressing you.”

Itachi, standing a few paces on the Lord's right, bows briefly. He needs no charm to be heard, not with the wonderful acoustics in the room, and Fugaku's lessons on voice projection.

"Thank you, Lord Black. My lords and ladies, in my preparations for the coming year, I have come across a pleasant bit of magic I thought might provide some amusement. Please, permit the demonstration, as a small token of my gratitude. Should it bring you a moment's joy, I will have achieved my objective perfectly."

He acknowledges the polite nods, but he waits for Riddle to incline his head mockingly before he pulls out his wand. The, by now blessedly familiar, state of determination is easy to bring up, taking but a moment of focus.

*"Expecto Patronum."*

The familiar figure of Susanō-no-Mikoto materialises flawlessly. He spends a long moment basking in the shocked intakes of breath, but his eyes are fixed on his protector. It is, objectively, a striking conjuration. The Patronus matches his Susanō from before, line for line. The wisps of flame, the giant sword, the armour and an armoured face framed by a wild shock of hair—his Patronus is a thing to behold.

It's tempting to check Riddle's reaction first, but as always his eyes go first to Regulus. Any thought of masks and pretences is forgotten; a happy boy of nine beams at his older brother. He sends him a small smile, before switching to the second most important person in the room.

Arcturus Black stares at his Patronus with a mix of awe and fear, cataloguing the ten-meter-high conjuration. He allows himself a moment to close his eyes and exhale in relief. It is certain; Lord Black will not let them go now. By this time tomorrow, he will be Heir Black, and Regulus and Kreacher will be safe in the confines of Castle Black.

He opens his eyes, and petty glee fights with equally petty glee—Walburga or Riddle, Walburga or Riddle—

Riddle.

He looks up and finds the electric-blue eyes unerringly. Riddle is impressively blank, but Itachi cannot find a shred of gleeful schadenfreude. He sends him a happy, cheeky smile, and basks in the answering frown. Point made and acknowledged.

He looks around the room and takes in the reactions. Not a single adult in the room is unaffected. Some—Malfoy, notably, but also Rosier, Yaxley and Flint have a healthy dose of apprehension in their eyes. Creature blood, most likely. Not one of them has averted his eyes from Itachi's ghostly protector, so he still has a little time to observe them without notice. Alphard is wary, tensed in a warrior's stance, but his lover, oh his lover is stunned. There is first-hand knowledge in the frozen expression, not an instinctive fear. Interesting, and important. Remember to organise a meeting with the two.

The rest of his family has interesting reactions, too. Walburga and Orion have nothing but hatred in their eyes, lips pulled back into sneers. Dorea and her husband, though, look both disturbed and impressed in equal measure. Cassiopeia, Bellatrix, and her husband look greedy, while Narcissa manages to look a bit bored. She is surprised and impressed, but nowhere near as much as the rest.

The drain on his magic is about to become problematic, so with a bow and conscious stemming of the flow of magic, he ends the spell.

"Thank you, my Lords. I hope you were at least slightly amused by my Patronus. My brother and I thank you for your time and attention. Apologies again for interrupting your conversation."

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Arcturus hunts him down first. "Congratulations, grandson," he murmurs. "I don't know how you managed it, and I don't want to. Either way, you've made your point. This evening will be spoken of in Japan by the morrow." He pauses for a moment, before continuing. "That was —not one of ours?"

Itachi hums noncommittally, uncertain. Ah why not, by this point. “My Patronus takes the shape of Susanō-no-Mikoto, Father of Storms. I thought it an—interesting development.”

“Indeed,” says Arcturus. The older man is still shaken, although speedily pulling himself back together. “You and your brother will sleep here, tonight. We have important things to discuss tomorrow.”

“Yes, we do. Thank you, Lord Black.”

Arcturus nods, mask almost perfectly back in place. “I will go inform your parents. Please, try not to terrify your guests any more than you already have.”

“Of course, Lord Black.”

He walks in the direction of his brother before he’s pounced on by Dorea and Potter.

“Grand-nephew,” says the lady. “That was quite a display.”

“Thank you, Lady Potter.” He smiles at her with all the innocence he has in him. “Did you like it, Lord Potter?”

Shrewd brown eyes bear into him for a moment, before easing up. “It was certainly memorable. Any Patronus would be extraordinary from an eleven-year-old, but yours is exceedingly impressive.”

“Thank you, my lord.” He nods and looks at him curiously. Lord Potter looks like there is something he would like to add.

“My heir, James. He is starting Hogwarts too this year.”

Is this—networking? How bizarre. “I will be sure to introduce myself, my lord.”

Dorea looks at her husband fondly if a bit helplessly. The man is awful at this. “Do so,” she says. “I will tell him about you. It would do me good to see the next generation of the Black-Potter alliance.”

Itachi takes care to keep any amusement from his face. There is no Black-Potter alliance, there is only Dorea, the apple of her brother’s eye, and the most formidable curse-breaking specialist in Britain, who decided she would marry her love come what may.

“As you say, Lady Potter,” he settles on. “Please excuse me, a respected lord is leaving soon, and I must pay my respects.”

“Of course,” the lady nods, echoed by her husband.

He weaves through the crowd, nodding absently, but this time his path to Riddle is nowhere near as obstructed.

“My lord,” he greets with a wide smile. “What is your verdict? Abject humiliation?”

“No, indeed not, little Black.”

The somewhat giddy amusement cools, then freezes. Did he—miscalculate? Was the Lord offended by Itachi’s daring? Tensing, he takes a small step back from the man, mind whirring. He made a mistake. Apologise. How? For what? What did he do—

Riddle’s eyes snap to the movement, and the air thickens even further. Deliberately distributing his weight, he loosens his body, preparing to run—Run away—Run—Run—Riddle’s eyes clear and the tension lessens. This is all well and good, but Itachi just

experienced some sort of magical variant of KI; it will take some time to come down from that adrenaline rush.

“I—apologise, my lord,” Itachi says in low, halting tones. “I meant no offence.”

Riddle softens his expression—false—and his posture—false—and twists his lips into a charming smile—false. “No need. I was not offended. Your Patronus merely caught me off-guard.”

Itachi nods slowly, trying and failing to smooth out his defensive body language. The closest he can come is to set his shoulders back into a loose, ready position, and keep his heart rate even.

Riddle’s charming smile tightens, growing strained. “Truly, Black. You’ve my honest congratulations.”

Itachi doesn’t reply but arranges his lips in a smile that matches Riddle’s for sincerity. After a beat, Riddle’s face shifts into a semi-neutral state of calculation.

“I would like to renegotiate our deal from before. Don’t trouble yourself with getting official or unofficial access to Castle Black. Instead, I want one event in Castle Black, in my honour.”

Itachi can almost hear his muscles creak, as he systematically forces them to unclench. It hurts, of course, but the pain is grounding. Thankful for the long sleeves, he tucks his arms inside, where the Lord won’t see them shake. He could do with a calming potion.

“Note that I am in no way saying no,” he says. His voice could be less thin and croaky, but it works and it doesn’t crack, and that’s good enough for now. “But even as Heir, I would be under some constraint, you understand? Some of the more, ah, *exuberant* gatherings would be impossible to organise here.”

Riddle pauses for a moment, looking him over. His magic ripples, loosening further. “I am not asking to host a revel at Castle Black, no,” he says. “I am shocked you would think such of me, or that you even know what revels are. Aren’t you approximately four years old?”

Izanami, but Itachi is pathetic. The deliberate return to earlier camaraderie shouldn’t work—he knows he’s being manipulated—but it does. He finally loses the last of his tension, and his head clears a little. Riddle is very good at this.

“The Black Library in the London house is highly specialised. I admit I assumed revels were something of the norm, with the, ah, select few pureblood families.” Not a word of a lie. The books and journals wrote so extensively of intensely carnal festivals, where anything went, from pleasure to carnage, with most everything in between.

“They are not.” The note of mocking in Riddle’s voice is perhaps the most honest emotion he’s shown in the past several minutes. “You might consider the validity of your sources. To get back to the matter at hand, I would host a purely political event. After tonight, an event hosted by the House of Black will be the place where everybody wants to be. Plainly put, I want this kind of prestige.”

“Done. If time is of the essence, and you don’t mind the shadow of family drama, the very next Black event will have you as the guest of honour. If not, we can schedule it for next summer. I hope the rumours will have died down by then.”

Riddle considers it for a moment, before humming. “I will contact you when I decide.”

“Very well. Sincere apologies, my Lord, but I do have to excuse myself. There are still anxious guests to speak to. Merry part.”

“Merry part.”

He tries to ignore the weight of Riddle’s attention as he walks away. His gamble with the Patronus may have netted him the Heirship, but the gamble with Riddle has only resulted in losses on his side.

He needs to become better at this.

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Chapter End Notes

In 8th-century Japan, the system of forbidden colors (禁色, kinjiki) was established to regulate the use of specific hues in traditional court attire within the Imperial Court. This color hierarchy was an integral part of the broader Ritsuryō system, which governed various aspects of court life and administration.

Under these regulations, certain colors were reserved for specific ranks among court officials:
• Indigo: Reserved for commoners
• Deep Purple (深紫, kokimurasaki): Reserved for the outer garments of first-rank aristocrats, deep purple signified high status and prestige within the court.
• Ōtan (orange): Exclusively used for the robes of the Crown Prince, orange represented the color of the sun at dawn. This color symbolized the Crown Prince's destined role to ascend to greatness and potentially become the empire's future sun.
The term kinjiki carries a dual meaning. While it literally translates to "forbidden colors," it also serves as a euphemism for same-sex love. Here, the kanji 禁 means "forbidden," and 色 can denote "erotic love" or "color."

This historical framework explains why the character Daigo is depicted wearing multi-layered purple-indigo robes with orange accents. His attire reflects his high status and possible association with the imperial lineage, adhering to the stringent color codes of the period and nodding to his male partner.

# Chapter 16

When he was very young, about two years of age, and his parents still had the heart to live and love and hope, Fugaku had told Itachi a tale.

There was once a young carp, living in a large, beautiful lake. He lived a happy and charmed life, listened to the wisdom of his parents and loved his many brothers and sisters very much. One day, a seagull came. It was relentless, as it dove and dove for the carp and his family who all scattered, fleeing. Then, just when it appeared tragedy is about to happen and the seagull was about to snatch his brother out of the water, the young carp fought. He swam fast, faster than he ever had before, and pushed his brother out of the angry bird's reach. After they both swam to safety, all the other carp congratulated him on his bravery. Only the wise elder noted: *Luck played a part, young one. You must not lay claim to Gods' grace*.

Some time has passed, and the young carp grew bigger and stronger. His courage was true but so was his pride. One day, as they were swimming in the shallow waters, a house cat dropped from the tree, claws inches away from his best friend's gills. Again, the young carp would have none of it. He jumped out of the water and slapped the cat with his tail. Before the cat could make sense of this, both of them quickly swam away. All the fish laughed and cheered, but the old, wise carp warned. *You had no business swimming in shallow waters, young one. You must not tempt the Gods' wrath.*

Time passed once more, and the young carp was no longer young, but a large, strong fish in his prime. He was known to be the strongest, bravest, most honourable carp in the lake. But then, one day a bear lumbered in from the forest, hungry from his long sleep. His friends and family franticly started to swim away, but the strong, brave carp said no. No, I am strong, and I am brave, and I fight to protect my family. Surely the Gods will grant me victory. Certain in his righteous cause, he swam towards the bear and jumped up, knowing the Gods will grant him the strength to defeat this foe, as they had before.

Shlick, went the sound of claws piercing the brave carp's body. Crunch, went the teeth, tearing into its flesh. Roar, went the bear, happy with how easily he had found his meal.

*Think, my son*, Fugaku would murmur to his young son. *You will be strong, one day. You will be brave. Remember, my little weasel, there are always stronger, braver men out there. You must always be respectful of your opponent's strength. The strength of your belief will only take you so far. The Gods do not reward hubris, but humility.*

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The atmosphere in Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, London, is thick and foreboding. The air smells of smoke and the silence whispers of danger.  Every single one of his instincts flares up.

“Kreacher,” whispers Itachi. “Take us to our rooms.”

This wasn’t a good idea. Grandfather would have gotten their belongings. He could have been in front of the fireplace now, spending what little time he has with Reg before the school term begins. He—

And, what? They announced to Wizarding Britain that they had cut ties with Walburga and Orion. The two traitors probably already burned all of their belongings they could get their hands on. But—there is the cache in the wall, hidden by Kreacher’s magic. They might not have spotted it yet. That’s where all their most precious belongings are, and he will be damned before he lets those blood traitors take it from him. They have done *quite enough.*

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There is no evidence of tampering in their rooms, past some basic spell damage on the door. Itachi swallows a relieved sigh. He had hoped they would be too distracted by everything to bother with petty revenge. And, of course, they should be in Gringotts now, getting the news of their shift in the social hierarchy. If they work quickly, they will be long gone before they return. In and out, that’s the plan. He opens his expanded satchel and gets to work.

“Kreacher,” he calls softly, once most of the personal items from the room are packed. “Where are Atlas’s things?”

The elf pauses, ears drooping slightly. “In the basement.”

He hands him an expanded pouch. “Could you please pack them?”

Kreacher pops off. Itachi is doing the last sweep of the room to check for anything valuable he had missed when the air in the room—Shifts. Training kicks in, as it tends to do in these situations, and his heart rate evens out, adrenaline streamlining his awareness, deleting all non-crucial thought processes. You know what this is. You've spent your whole first life in situations like these. Now properly tense, he waits for a moment, then two.

Kreacher pops in, eyes large, ears trembling faintly. "The wards. The wards are up. Nobody goes in, nobody goes out."

Wards can keep Blacks out? Black Wards can turn on Heir Black? Interesting. He wouldn't have thought that was on the table.

"Can you apparate?" Wizards rarely ever ward against house-elves, especially their own.

"Only within the house."

He pulls out his wand, and the steady presence grounds him. Think.

They're on the second floor. He can't stay here. They have basic wards on the rooms, but they will hardly stand up to a grown witch or wizard. They have to move, get out somewhere where they can't be driven into a corner.

He should never have come here.

Itachi blinks. This is *his house*, and these are *his things.* Years, he wasted trying to live around them, letting things lie, and what does he have to show for it? A traumatised little brother and a murdered dog. The audacity—He shouldn't have come here? *They should never have dared to attack me.*

“Alright, let’s give this a try.”

He grabs Kreacher, tucks him close, and summons his magic, imbuing it with as much sturdy, implacable rage as he can manage. Rage is not in short supply, so a decent—if primitive—shield expands out of his body.

“Cover your face,” he snaps and launches himself through the window.

The second floor of an English house is fairly low, and his magic is more than strong enough to keep the glass and metal away. With magic strengthening his bones and muscles, all he needs to do is—That’s right. Curl out your body, keep your knees and hips nice and springy, careful on the ankles—

Success. Hardly a success worth talking about much, but still. He hasn’t damaged himself any and he’s on the lawn, with plenty of space and flora that can double as cover.

“Wizards,” he sneers. “How very practical. Can you move physically over the border of the property?”

Kreacher is almost catatonic with shock, giant eyes bulged and body trembling with adrenaline.

“Kreacher,” he snaps. Footsteps are audible now, at least one large body running their way.

“I—I can try,” says the elf. “You should go instead, little star. Let me hold them off.”

“You are the only one who can apparate,” he replies as calmly as he can. “I am perfectly able to distract them while you get Lord Black. Go, go, quickly.”

His fae parent takes off, and Itachi can’t help but be grateful for the elf’s tendency to fall back to obedience when frightened. He never would have left otherwise, and, honestly, this is a fight he will relish. Vicious, dark rage howls in his soul, his magic taking clues from his

bloodlust and whipping him further into a frenzy. There is little left of a Shinobi known for being emotionless and even-tempered even when wading through blood.

Orion Black skids to a stop at the exit of the house. Itachi wastes no time in analysing his moods or predicting his behaviour.

He leaps forward, twisting narrowly to avoid an incoming curse. The interesting thing about duelling is that the magical field around your body slows down foreign magic—it's why dodging is at all possible. With how much magic Itachi is putting out, the curse is slow enough to comfortably avoid. He twists in the air as best he can, and alters his direction enough to—

A red curse hits him straight to the chest.

Time loses most of its meaning. The part of his brain not shrieking in agony—the part of his brain that he has learned to keep separate, just for situations like these—is morbidly fascinated by the sensation. Over his life, Itachi has become intimately familiar with how pain works, how it feels, and how to manipulate it. Tsukuyomi distorts the perception of the subject as well as the caster. When Itachi is torturing someone for three days, he's down there with them throughout, for all that his experience of it is markedly different than that of the recipient.

All of which is to say that he can very easily tell the difference between *this* and the real deal. There's no nuance to this, no psychological dimension, or variance in texture and intensity of the sensation. This is just plain, brute pain; the curse is affecting his brain, creating pain signals that the body is forced to interpret.

He's deep enough into his mind, that he doesn't really register that the pain has stopped. Well, that's not true. He registers, of course he does. His body has stopped writhing, and his throat has stopped screaming. But it takes a few moments for the information to cycle from awareness to conscious action. Which is honestly, a stroke of luck.

Orion Black really should have learned not to underestimate children.

The man stops next to his heaving body, points a wand point-blank and fires off another red curse.

It would be a lie to say it's easier this time; there is no gradation to speak of. It's a very binary state of being, in a way. Either no agony—discounting the aftershocks of the previous curse—or maximal possible agony his body can produce.

On the other hand, Itachi was trained to withstand pain since his Academy days. Torture is different. Pain is only one element. It has its uses in T&I, of course, but the real business of a good T&I operative is psychological competency. Pain is—nothing. A physical sensation. But pain can mean fear, panic and hysteria, and *those* things will break a man, especially when coloured by things like hope, anger and shame. This curse will break a mind, yes, but it's a crude overdose. It will hardly get you much.

With even the second of warning he had to prepare, Itachi slips into the quiet part of his mind almost before he registers the pain. Alright—quick plan. The curse lasts about ten, twenty seconds, and he's pretty fresh, magic-wise. He's plenty of fight in him, in theory. The curse shouldn't have any physical effect, other than the obvious. So, any moment now, Orion going to release it, presumably to watch him beg. That's as good an opinion as you could have hoped for. He will gloat, he will drag this out. If he wanted to kill you, you'd be dead already.

With that, said, while the curse might be crude, it's clearly not meant to be survived. It's not doing anything to his body directly, but the results speak for themselves. He can't inhale, what with the screaming and writhing. The same is true for any real control of his body. He's, quite literally, paralysed with pain. An interesting sensation, he hadn't encountered it much. Most T&I training suggests it's best to give the subject a little space to struggle, because of the demoralising aspect of failure. He doesn't know what to do about this lack of control of his body.

Alright, if he can't move his body, he can damn well move his Chakra. Magic, whatever. He focuses on it as best he can. It's—Oh boy. It's screaming too, in a way. Itachi is pretty certain that any magical being with a passing awareness of their environment would sense the confused screams of magic being tortured by the Cruciatus. Interesting.

Where does that leave him? Wait. Wasn't he—

He was. Itachi is in fact still holding his wand. His hand is clenched around the handle so hard that it would likely have cracked if not for the stone inlay. Alright, that's a solid chance, right there.

Two things happen at once. Orion lifts the curse but remains, foolishly within reach. Itachi flies back into his body, ignoring irrelevant data with the ease of long practice. Focus—*focus*—right arm—right *arm*—

Orion raises his wand again.

You can't afford this again. You're young and sickly. Your heart will give out. A lot of healers spent a long time making your body into something functional.

"Cru—"

Desperation turns out to be the key to overriding the body's hysterical flailing. He curls his abdominals as much as he can, his upper body lurches, right arm lashes out—

He stabs Orion in the thigh with his wand, stone inlay making it that much easier to work past the flimsy bit and dig the wand right into the bone.

Orion falls, shriek turning into a scream. If he had any real control left over his body, he'd let the wand go. As it is, Orion's movement carries him too, and his spasming body slams into the ground, head bouncing off the cobblestones. The lower half of his face—breaks, blood filling his mouth. If he were alone, this is probably where it would end—he's hardly in any condition to influence his environment much. Since he's not alone, and his wand is *frothing,* Itachi knows it's far from over. Case in point, the torrents of wounded, furious magic it is pumping straight into Orion's body.

Through the haze of what is likely a decent concussion on top of all the torture, his rage is rising to meet that of his wand. It's his turn now, isn't it? Orion got his hits in, fair enough. All is fair in love and war. But, now it's Itachi's turn.

Miserable fool, he thinks, disgusted. You really should have killed me immediately. You had *Itachi Uchiha* helpless on the ground, at your mercy, and you went and fucked around. Well, now it's time to find out.

Experimentally, he sinks into the magic and soaks it with intent. He's learned a few tricks over the years. His wand went with a similar approach to the Cruciatus—quantity over quality, as it were. Itachi nudges it back to a more efficient balance. Pain is whatever. Terror is what you want because terror will, with some care, turn to despair. And you can get a man to do anything you want if you know how to make him despair.

Orion's scream shifts to a familiar pitch of almost lucid hysteria, and Itachi lets things develop from there. It's time to take stock of his situation.

His body is spasming, mouth open, throat working hard to swallow as much blood as it can; he probably bit down on his tongue. Past that, he can't pinpoint any concrete injuries. That doesn't mean much, since most of him feels like an active wound. His heart is racing, working on a decent case of tachycardia.

Itachi might very well die here. He might outlive Orion? It depends on their relative rates of blood loss. He nailed his artery, yes, but the wand is serving as a very efficient plug. On the other hand, Orion hardly has the willpower to resist a nasty Genjutsu for more than a few seconds. If Itachi is not very mistaken—he is not—Orion's brain is already mostly mush.

He counts the seconds, then his heartbeat. When his mind starts slipping, he focuses on Regulus. Do you want Regulus to come and find your corpse? Was one brother not enough?

Come on—Regulus—Regulus—Kreacher—Regulus—Sasuke—Regulus—*Sasuke*—

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A pop—Apparition—Kreacher—

A force lifts him—up—up—up—and then he's gently lowered into the same position as before, but elsewhere. Not ideal, but it could be worse. He's been swallowing the blood in his mouth for so long, he can probably manage a little more.

Time passes, and finally, finally, magic washes over him. One by one, epicentres of pain wink out. His tongue is healed—or at least it stops bleeding. The inferno at the back of his head quietens into a dull throb, and his right palm is covered with something cool and soothing.

Small, leathery hands touch his face softly, and a noise—a voice—speaks right next to his ears. Not ideal. Maybe he can read lips? No, nope. His eyes have long since stopped sending any discernible image to his mind. Is that a big deal? It doesn't *feel* like a big deal. There's hardly anything worth looking at here—Focus! He needed to focus—

Focus—Why? Why did he need to focus?—Who—Kreacher?

Sound trails in again, slightly louder now.

"-us—Siri—Sirius -"

Regulus? Is that—What—

He loses some time again. The spasms of his body increase in number and intensity, each clench bringing a fresh torrent of confused pain. He's—somewhere else? Propped up by something? Yes, yes he is, and it's soft and warm. His head is turned to the side, conveniently, and while the pain doesn't stop, it's nice to see the incomprehensible lights.

"—ri—Siri—Siri—Si—"

Bigger hands, adult hands touch his shoulders and wrap around his wrist.

What's this? He might be half-dead but he's hardly going to give up his *wand* without a fight. He still has a few drops of magic left in him. He can still—

"—Siri—Siri no—Siri it's me—"

Wait—wait—*Regulus*? Does Regulus need his wand? Whatever Regulus wants, Regulus gets. He surrenders to the hands, head lolling back, surrendering to the spasms. He's drooling; how uncouth.

"—ror Shacklebolt—"

Sound comes in waves, amplifying and lowering without rhyme or reason. That's not the problem. The problem is the spasming. Blood is filling his mouth again, and this time it's impossible to choke it down, not when he can't control his throat—

Magic takes away the bleeding, but his body, his useless spasming body, is lowered again to the ground. No—no—no—

The sounds stop. All sounds, not just the snippets of voices. It could be a spell, or it could be his mind deciding to cut its losses and spare him the confusion of sensory data he can't interpret. It helps, strangely. Now, with any luck—Yes! A remaining speck of focus allows him to close his eyes. Much better. No sound, no light. With most of his senses shut down, he can maybe avoid the worst of it.

Funny, that his saviours are doing, inadvertently, what Orion had failed to do. Pain, Itachi knows what to do with, but the sheer chaos and bumbling of this confused rescue is starting to overwhelm him. If someone doesn't do something, he will choke and die here. He can't breathe, and his well-meaning rescuers don't appear to pay any attention. Already, he can't feel his hands and feet, and the pressure behind his eyes and ears is growing—

Magic washes over him again, when he's about five seconds away from death, by his most optimistic estimate. This person, whoever they are, knows what they are doing. The blood in his mouth vanishes. In the next moment, his lungs expand with fresh, clean air—a very useful spell, that, he will have to remember it—and his airways clear.

The air tingles again, indicating another active spell, and the ground underneath him softens enough to be comfortable but stays firm enough to provide support. Very considerate, what with the spasms. Sooner or later, he'd have broken something.

The more pain leaves him, the more awareness seeps in its place. His vision sharpens from pastel blobs, into smaller, more brightly coloured blobs. His mind stops glitching out as much, and basic reasoning operations are again within reach.

One basic feat of reason is this: you should not swallow too much blood or you will vomit. Case in point, he doesn't have the muscle control to ease the cramps, but as blood and vomit rush out of his mouth, another spell comes his way that vanishes the lot. A wave of dizziness hits hard, and the next few moments are lost. When he comes to, the sound is still off, which means the condition is likely self-inflicted. His vision, though, his vision has improved by leaps and bounds. More importantly, the seizure has decreased to very manageable levels, twitching instead of full-body flinching.

—Regulus—Regulus—Regulus—

He gurgles as best he can; how hard can it be? All Itachi ever loved were little brothers, what else could he want? Get Regulus here, Amaterasu above—

His head is turned carefully, and Kreacher peers into his eyes, presumably trying to find some hint of intelligence.

He gurgles again; it's hard to speak when you can't hear, even without a mangled skull. Either way, he must have shown enough proof of life, because magic tingles and he is raised into a reclining position. Holy Hectate, that's a relief. Kreacher's head takes up most of the visual field, but behind him, he can see the blurry forms of several adult humans; too many for it to be just Arcturus. Unimportant; none of them are Regulus. Where could he possibly be—

His agitation must come though because Kreacher says something. And again. And again. The longer Itachi doesn't show any signs of understanding, the elf grows more and more

alarmed, until at last, a wave of magic washes over him. Whatever it is, it doesn't help; other than the tingles, not a single thing changes.

Kreacher visibly despairs for less than a moment, but seeing that soul-deep pain in his parent's eyes is going to stay with Itachi for the rest of his days. The elf bears it stoically for a moment, before tucking it away. A leathery hand smooths over his face—his still slack drooling face—before he pops away.

The spell keeps him sitting up, thank the Gods, so he has some time to carefully tuck the memory of Kreacher's pain right next to Atlas, Mikoto and Shisui. At some point, he will probably have to stop hoarding his bleeding wounds, but today is not that day, not when they're trying so hard to keep him alive.

Kreacher returns with his brother, and Itachi barely stops himself from passing out then and there. Regulus looks to be uninjured, for all that he's covered in blood. Orion's, or Itachi's, and neither is a particularly good option. That said, whatever focusing method Reggie is using, it's working; he looks at Itachi with eyes free from hysteria. He is also saying something and has been for a while now.

With gargantuan effort, Itachi shakes his head. Regulus nods once, gesture firm and determined movement, before turning around and marching in the direction of the adults in the distance.

Itachi's mind is occupied by Kreacher's hand that's smoothing over his head. The warmth and the safety he gets from the loving gesture are difficult to internalise. He'd cry if he had the energy for it. Things being as they are, he settles for closing his eyes and surrendering to the flood of emotion. There is joy in complete submission, too.

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Regulus returns with a phalanx of adult-shaped humans, which sends Itachi's heart into overdrive. Being surrounded by so many stingers when he's this vulnerable is in no way acceptable.  Thankfully, Regulus is there; if he focuses very hard on him, he can just about remain calm. Well, not *calm*, but unmoving.

Spells wash over him. Instinctively, his muscles tense—Kreacher's magic is one thing, but these are strangers casting who knows what. As it happens, the newly acquired nerve damage does odd things to a body. Namely, when he tenses his shoulders, his arms start twitching and flopping around like they're being electrocuted. He's seen similar things in the field, but never from *brain* damage. Interesting.

His musings are cut short by a sudden roar of sound. Wonderful, he thinks, eyes watering. They fixed his ears. What luck. His stomach rolls, as a whine winds through his throat, eyes clenching shut. The entire world screams at him, people, wind, birds—Regulus's voice rises above the rest at a pitch that sends his mind spinning and white spots dance in front of his eyes. The words are too loud to be understood, but Regulus's emotions are clear—cold rage. The snap of Kreacher's fingers thunders across his overwrought mind and the noise dials down to a manageable level. He drops back into his invisible chair, exhaling in relief.

"—re you done with torturing my brother? Or do you want to try an Unforgivable too, while you're at it?"

"Now see here you little brat—"

Regulus's voice snaps over the adult's bass easily. "Do you think I cannot get you removed? From my own house? I very much can. One complaint that you're menacing the Heir of House Black and you can make peace with rescuing Kneazles out of trees for the rest of your career, such as it may be."

Itachi can't help but gurgle in appreciation. Whatever happened to his scholarly baby brother? All grown up and bullying law enforcement, apparently.

"I'm sure that what my colleague wanted to say," interrupts a voice that Itachi wants to wrap around his body and purr, "is that sensory magic is very complicated. Without knowing what your brother was cursed with, preventing a sensory overload during the initial moments is impossible."

Regulus harrumphs but relents. "I apologise for the misunderstanding, Auror Shacklebolt, and my heated words. You can imagine that I am—distraught. I will try to contain myself better."

“Not at all, Mister Black. You’re handling yourself with admirable poise, minor outbursts aside. Now, do you want to see to your brother?”

Regulus kneels, voice shifting a hundred and eighty into a soft, soothing cadence. “Siri, can you hear me?” Soft and soothing on first blush, Itachi corrects himself. Sharks are lurking beneath that too-still surface, that much is obvious. Shame Itachi is too muddled to narrow things down further.

“Oua’s,” he gurgles.

“*Thank Circe*.” Alright, so, part of Reggie’s hangups was bottled-up worry. Reasonable, considering. “You—you will be fine. The—the torture has—it has—your nerves -”

“Peace, lad,” rumbles the honey-voiced man. Shacklebolt, was it? “You don’t need to explain anything, now.”

“I do,” Regulus snaps. “I do need to. He wants to know. He always wants to know.” He inhales, tangibly calming himself. “I apologise again, Auror Shacklebolt. Please do excuse my rudeness.”

He turns to Itachi once again and takes a moment to compose himself as much as possible.“You are fine. The Aurors have summoned the Mediwizards who will arrive presently. We will figure out  a safe way to move you to St. Mungos when they do.”

Okay, that all sounds as it should be.

“I cannot explain the situation more thoroughly—I will not. I do not understand it myself, and Grandfather is handling everything. For now, Heir Black needs to get his tongue reattached, his nerves un-fried, his concussion healed, his teeth re-grown, his jaw un-sprained and his skin un-burnt.”

“Holy fucking shit, boss,” whisper-shouts someone in the back. “Nobody has dosed the kid with pain-relief potions, right? Why hasn’t he passed out from the pain long ago?”

“Auror Locke, do shut up,” says Shacklebolt. “Heir Black, if you can hear me, we need to establish a base level of communication. As a Heir of an Ancient and Noble House of Hogwarts age, your consent is enough for us to treat you. If you think you are unable to represent your interests, Lord Black is an acceptable substitute.”

Itachi blinks for a long moment, untangling the words. Lord Black—Grandfather? What? Oh, oh, medical proxy, that’s what he wants. He gurgles to show he’s following, before cutting his eyes to Regulus and gurgling again, this time trying to load the sound with encouragement.

“Hippogriff’s horn,” mutters the Auror from before, voice low with morbid amazement.

“Auror Locke, go—go find the Healers,” sighs Shacklebolt. It says good things about Itachi’s state that he can discern so many different voices.

“Before baby Black starts breathing fire,” mutters another Auror, a Lady this time.

“Auror Fiddlewood, join Auror Locke.” This Shacklebolt sounds like an eminently capable man. It’s a shame he’s an Auror and thus beyond poaching—not that Itachi has anywhere to poach him to. For. Whatever. He could be Regulus’s bodyguard? That’s a thing, here? As the heir of the Heir, Regulus’s body very much needs guarding.

“—wice for no.”

Itachi blinks, having completely lost the thread of conversation around the time he slipped into a fantasy of the delightful Auror Shacklebolt being both Regulus’s bodyguard and his own personal narrator. Itachi could go around with eyes closed, blessedly free from the curse of vision, and the man could just narrate the goings-on. How lovely would that be? Regulus safe and the syrupy, golden voice all around him—them—all—around—Regulus—

“—ealer now, do you hear m—”

*Sleep*.

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# Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Arcturus POV

Arcturus Black can't quite say this is the worst day of his life. There are many worst days of his life, depending on the type and duration of the trauma. He hasn't lead a good and virtuous life. He has barely led an acceptable one.

With that in mind, the events of this day are difficult to place, on his long list of regrets. His son is workably dead from a *wand-wound* to the thigh, at the hand of his grandson who was almost tortured to death by aforementioned son.

There is no fixing this. Not all of them will survive it. All he can do is try to avoid the worst option.

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Lord Black, his grandson and two house-elves stand in front of a gate. It sounds like the beginning of a bad joke.

Walburga may not be involved directly, but the magical signature on the Wards around the property is hers and hers alone. They will have to tear them down. What a waste. The Ward scheme has stood around Grimmauld Place for hundreds of years. It protected hundreds of Blacks, absorbed their magic, and grew and improved—destroyed because of what, exactly? Greed? Pride? Insanity?

All true, the last one most of all. Ironically, Arcturus feels the Black Insanity pull on his heart presently; that, if nothing else, is easy enough to ignore. He hadn't succumbed to the madness for forty years, and he's not going to do so now.

“Tansy, summon the Aurors. Tell them that the situation is beyond urgent and to bring some Obliviators. A child’s life lies in the balance.” They are all still alive, for now. He doesn’t know how long this will remain the case. “Kreacher, keep Regulus safe. At the first sign of trouble, apparate him to Castle Black.”

“I will,” says the elf. Not for the first time, Arcturus pushes down a frown. The crisp elocution from an *elf* will always sound unnatural. He doesn’t get anything out of the typical servile nonsense, but they are hardly people.

Never mind that. Focus on the practicalities. The street is nominally Muggle, and the last thing he needs right now is a delay because the Aurors decide the creatures need pacifying. He casts a Notice-me-not and inhales a long, bracing breath. That done, he casts a Patronus.

“Walburga, you know what you have to do,” he tells the ghostly raven. “You are still a child of House of Black. There is nowhere Family Magic cannot reach you. Lower the wards. Now.”

“Well said,” a man’s voice says behind him, as the raven flies off. Don’t flinch. It’s the Aurors. Soundless apparition, combined with a sound-dampening charm. Impressive, for a troupe of mudbloods and blood-traitors. “Is this a hostage situation, Lord Black?”

Ah, that’s why the voice is familiar. Heir Shacklebolt, neither a mudblood nor a blood-traitor. They might be of some use.

“That remains to be seen. Orion Black, previous Heir Black, and his wife, lady Walburga Black, hold my Heir, Sirius Black behind Wards that do not respond to my magic. I leave you to your conclusions.”

“Why would your son kill his son,” asks an Auror. This time, Arcturus moves and cranes his head to see who dared. The witch stares back with small-minded glee. Foolish. Whatever upper hand you have will only last for the duration of this disaster, and House Black pays back their debts.

“Auror Starling, you’re suspended. Go home.”

At least there's some competence on display. He turns to Heir Shacklebolt and inclines his head a hair. "I do not dare suggest how a unit of Aurors should organize their operation, but I do suggest a focus on preventing a crime, instead of solving it."

"Do you think they will negotiate?"

"I think not," he says. "If the threat of Family Magic hadn't convinced them, I don't know what will."

Regulus is eerily calm beside them. On one hand, he's grateful that the boy's faith in his older brother's invulnerability is sparing them the hysterics now. On the other hand, he fears what will happen once it's shattered. Sirius is a once-in-a-generation talent, but he stands no chance against a fully-trained wizard.

He is alive. They are both alive. Focus on that.

"Very well. Auror Ibex, Auror Locke, you know what to do. Gather evidence and bring them down. And be quick about it."

It seems Walburga's fate is sealed too. For all their general incompetence, the two Aurors work well together. They record the magical signature, gather several samples of the magic and set about mapping them out. Arcturus finds himself vaguely interested. He knows little of Wards, but the ones set by his daughter-in-law feel strong and well thought out.

"I'm going to have to burn them out, boss," says Locke. "Either that or spend a day or three weaselling around."

"Do what you have to. The Obliviators are already on the scene." Nobody will get out of it unscathed if the Heir of House Black dies while the Aurors pussyfoot around Muggles. Arcturus knows it, they know it, Wizarding Britain knows it. He wouldn't even have to lift a finger to do it—every single Noble House would rise up in outrage. Not that he wouldn't, of course.

The golden-haired wizard—sporting a suspicious likeness to the Malfoy House—grins at the Head Auror and takes out a black box bristling with runes. Well, now. What is this?

The Auror places the box on the edge of the Wards. “Close your eyes,” he cackles—cackles! —taps his wand on the box and takes a quick step back. The boom is expected, but the light isn’t. It’s bright enough that Arcturus hurries to shield his eyes with his elbow.

“All set, boss.” Whatever the device did, it came at a steep cost. The Auror pants, visibly drained, and his body sways. All that remains of the device is a black puddle of unknowable material.

“Move in. Prepare for at least two hostiles.”

“Kreacher will lead us to Siri.”

More than one Auror flinches at the too-young voice, and Auror Shacklebolt sends him a blank look. He looks right back. Keeping a devoted brother from the crime scene with a loyal house elf by his side is a fool’s errand. At least now they prevent the child from apparating into a battlefield.

“They are in the garden,” says Kreacher.

Arcturus takes in a deep breath. “Regulus, you have to stay back.” He pauses waiting for an outburst that does not come.

“I know. I am no use in a fight. Kreacher will get me when it’s safe.”

Arcturus raises an impressed eyebrow. “Thank you, Grandson. Auror, shall we?”

Kreacher touches their legs with a professional air, and they rematerialise in front of a grisly scene straight out of the war. A wave of confusion blanks his mind, and for the first time in quite a few years, he doesn't know what to do.

His son—his grandson—the blood —are they even—No, no they are alive. Both of them—he can feel them. He can, can't he?

Auror Shacklebolt is, to his shame, much quicker to jump into action. He sends a quick volley of spells on the two prone figures. When Sirius' body is levitated away, the wand that his grandson has buried to the hilt into his son's thigh comes out with a sick sound. Blood pours out of the wand-shaped hole, quickly stopped by a muttered spell by Auror Shacklebolt.

His stomach tightens. He won't be able to watch this part. Instead, he focuses on the Auror, firing off spells one right after the other with barely a pause for breath. The Auror's professional mask remains flawless. There is nothing but focus on his features; the only sign of upset to be seen on his face is a small furrow in his brow.

In the silence, an odd sound catches his attention. It's—Tapping? What—

Oh. He closes his eyes and sends a quick prayer to Lady Hecate. His Grandson is still suspended in the air, and the sound he can hear is blood falling to the stone cobbles. *Pat—pat—pat.* He shudders.

It doesn't take more than a minute to stem the flow of blood in his son's thigh, but it feels considerably longer. Long enough for Kreacher to decide no attack is imminent, and pop back with Regulus. He closes his eyes and ears against the desperate scream. It was inevitable, he knows. It doesn't help.

"Stay back, Regulus," he warns, eyes still closed, gathering what little composure he can in this pit of despair. "The Auror needs to stabilise him first."

The boy doesn't hear him of course. Switch the target, then. "Kreacher, keep him back." Judging by the lack of a hysterical child barreling into them, the elf heeded his command.

Alternatively, the boy had sense enough not to cut his brother's chances further. Doesn't matter.

Auror Shacklebolt is unfazed by the screaming child, at least on the surface. What it says about both of them, Arcturus doesn't know. The Auror lowers Sirius on the ground carefully and sends a barrage of similar spells at him.

"Well, Auror," he says, forgiving himself the tremble in his voice. "What is the situation."

"One moment," Shacklebolt grits out between spells.

He bites his lip to prevent whatever inanity from escaping. Best let the Auror do his job.

"Both gentlemen will survive," says Shacklebolt a long three minutes later. "Mister Black—"

"Start with my Grandson, if you would. Whatever days Mister Black has left to him will be spent in Azkaban."

Shacklebolt inclines his head, apparently taking no offence at being interrupted. He also likely agrees with him. "Heir Black is severely injured. He suffered prolonged exposure to the Cruciatus, a severe concussion, his tongue is bitten off, his teeth are shattered, he has third-degree burns and a sprained jaw. I already administered a blood-replenishing potion, and have stopped all the bleeding, but a certified healer will have to do the rest.."

Shacklebolt pauses his calm, gruesome recital and summons a Patronus; a deceptively harmless-looking anteater with curved, five-inch-long claws.

"A team of healers at Twelve, Grimmauld Place, London. By order of Head Auror Shacklebolt."

The anteater disappears, and the Auror continues.

“The Healers’ efforts will be undermined by any magic we cast on Heir Black. Blood-replenishing was crucial, but the rest will have to wait.”

Arcturus closes his eyes and spends a long minute trying to organise his mind into a semblance of order. Breathe. In and out. Sirius will be fine. He is injured, but—It’s—It’s fixable. Some skele-gro, burn paste and—Something for the nerves. And the burns. And, maybe—People can become strange after the Cruciatus, sometimes, so—A mind-healer? Are there potions for—

Bile rises in his throat.

“Can we.” He stops, breathes out, and starts again. “Can we—” He gestures helplessly at the boy—his grandson—*Sirius*—spasming on the ground.

“Only very little. Heir Black is—nominally—awake. Don’t restrain him and keep his head tilted at all times to make sure his airways remain unobstructed. In case of vomiting.”

That’s all the invitation Regulus and Kreacher need to rush to his Heir. Arcturus closes his eyes again. Circe.

“Is he—likely to vomit,” he can’t help but ask. It doesn’t matter even a little bit; it’s laughably simple to spell such things away. It’s just—it doesn’t fit, and his mind latched on to the irregularity, desperate to not think about the rest.

“He swallowed a great deal of blood,” is the bland reply. “Judging by the contusion on the back of his head, he bit straight through his tongue, possibly upon contact with the stone cobbles. Shattering his teeth in the process.”

Or perhaps he bit through his tongue and shattered his teeth during the torture, Arcturus thinks. Numb doesn’t begin to cover it. Arcturus is not a particularly nice man, he’s seen and done awful things. But he never—His *son* tortured a beautiful, Pureblood child of eleven—

He cast the Cruciatus on him, over and over, when Arcturus *knows* he wouldn't have withstood even a moment, under. He couldn't have—

A rattlesnake Patronus swims through the air and speaks in Auror Locke's voice. "House secured, boss. Ms Black came quietly, denying any knowledge or culpability in the matter."

"Her signature was on the Wards." The words come out of his mouth, surprising nobody more than himself. Then he glances at his grandson they would have happily tortured to death, and is not surprised after all. "Walburga Black was, at the very least, complicit."

Auror Shacklebolt sends him a blank look, that nonetheless conveys an impressed sentiment. "Thank you for your cooperation, Lord Black. Your statement will remain on record. Would you be willing to testify to that effect?"

"Oh yes," he says, feeling quite tired all of a sudden. What a deeply terrible day. "Whatever you need Auror. Bury them in Azkaban. Feed them to the Dementors. Send them through the Veil. This is—This is beyond forgiveness."

He can feel the eyes of the Auror on him for a long time, but he finds he can't quite look away from his two grandchildren.

"Very well. My Aurors have already recorded her magical signature, which is enough to take her into custody."

"Do what you can. Family magic stands at your disposal in this matter."

To think he would ever be offering such to an Auror of all wizards. To think that a Black would ever stoop this low.

"Take her into custody," the Auror says to his ghostly anteater. "The rest of you come here. Carefully. The scene is—delicate." The professional tone wavers for only a moment.

Understandable. Professional or not, *Grindelwald* would pause at this. Sirius—He—His brave little lion-cub—

The Aurors file in, and Arcturus summons the strength to approach his grandchildren.

Silent tears flow down Regulus's face, as he whispers his brother's name like a mantra. Sirius is propped up by fae magic. The hazy-eyed, blood-stained child holds little resemblance to the proud, poised boy he has come to know. Arcturus blinks. He's so small. He can't have always been that small? How could he have looked so unbreakable, if so?

Sirius' hand is still clenched around his wand, holding it like a knife. The same hand that is covered in vicious burns, bones peeking through blackened flesh. The wand needs to go—but how to make the boy relinquish it without causing him more harm? He kneels and looks into the blank silver eyes. Not a sign of intelligence. Gently, he places his hand on the undamaged parts of his arm and tries to dislodge the bloody wand—

Panic lights up Sirius' blank eyes, and the boy starts fighting. What was left of his magic rises desperately—Hecate help them, not this, now—They can't afford this right now—

"Stop him," he tells Regulus, loading his voice with as much authority as he is able. "He must not spend any more magic. Not so much as a *Lumos.* Talk to him."

Wide, terrified eyes snap to his for a moment, before understanding clears them. "Siri, Siri wait. Siri, it's me. It's Regulus. Stop it—" He places his tiny hands on Sirius's equally tiny chest—have his grandsons been so small this entire time? They're practically infants—How did he ever let them leave the Castle?

Sirius settles as soon as his brother's voice registers. Hazy, clouded eyes track his brother's movements slowly. After a moment, a whisper of something that could have been a sound—or a wheeze—escapes the boy. The wand clatters to the ground. He resolutely doesn't look at the instrument covered in his son's blood and his grandson's skin and instead focuses on Sirius.

“Auror Shacklebolt,” he calls. The sporadic spasms are turning more violent. They will become a full-blown seizure if nothing is done about it.

“Stand back.”

He obeys, but Regulus doesn’t budge so much as an inch. With a barely audible sigh, the Auror gives in to the inevitable and doesn’t attempt to detach the two. Instead, he casts a short series of spells, with little visible result.

“This is beyond my skill,” Shacklebolt says, the faint note of worry in his voice stabbing into Arcturus’ spine. “I have placed a stasis spell on the burnt hand, and done my best to re-heal his tongue, but there is nothing I can do about the seizure. The wound on his tongue will re-open soon I fear. For now, you should lay him on his side so he doesn’t swallow the blood, and let the seizure play out. The Mediwizards should be here presently.”

As it happens, it’s not Healers that file in, but the Auror Unit. As they enter the Garden, they spread wide, and start documenting the place for evidence.

Arcturus holds on to his composure by truly Herculean efforts.

“While we wait for the Mediwizards, perhaps you could provide some information regarding the case.”

“Now,” he says. “You want to take my statement now.”

“If you don’t mind.”

In the end, it’s the voice that convinces him. He owes the man for his professional conduct and competence. “As you wish.” He turns to his one lucid grandson. “Regulus, come here if you would. We need to provide information to the Aurors.”

A terrible, broken snarl twists Regulus's face for a moment before he remembers the stakes. He wants Orion and Walburga to rot more than possibly anyone else in the world. Plus there is the matter of whatever Sirius did to Orion that rendered him—that.

"Of course," he says in a tight voice. "Anything to help the Ministry."

Auror Shacklebolt shows none of the discomfort Arcturus knows he must feel at the sight of Regulus. The nine-year-old is covered in blood and dirt, tear tracks cutting through the smears on his face quickly oxidising from red to brown. "If you don't mind, could you walk me through the day? Everything you can remember."

"It's quite straightforward, Auror," says Regulus. "My brother, newly named Heir to House Black, and I were moving to Castle Black today. Sirius and Kreacher—our house-elf—came here a little over two hours ago, to gather our belongings." He takes in a sharp breath. "About an hour ago, Kreacher apparated to Castle Black to get help from Lord Black. Siri and him were trapped. The Wards—" He pauses again to gather his composure. "The Wards trapped them inside. They managed to escape out of our room, and into the garden. Siri—" Inhale—exhale. "Siri sent Kreacher to get help, while he stayed to distract Orion. Kreacher managed to find a weak spot in the Wards just big enough for an elf to squeeze through, and apparated to us."

"Understood." Says Shacklebolt. "Do you happen to know how your brother escaped the house? My Aurors tell me there was another set of Wards around the building."

"He jumped through the window," says Regulus, a horrible shade of a smile on his face. "I believe you can see it from here."

Arcturus, not even surprised, nevertheless looks up at the house. Indeed, a shattered window is there on the second floor, third room to the left.

Shacklebolt looks to be doing similar types of calculations and coming up with similar improbable numbers. "Understood. Lord Black, do you have anything to add?"

“Just to reiterate my earlier statement. Lowest pit of Azkaban, the Kiss, or the Veil. Nothing else is acceptable.”

It’s not the Auror the words are meant for. As expected, Regulus tangibly relaxes at the unshakable certainty that the offenders will be wiped off the face of the earth for this.

The Auror knows it too, because he doesn’t comment, but settles for a solemn nod, that relaxes the boy even further. “Rest assured, the perpetrators will not escape unpunished. Thank you for your cooperation.”

The Auror unit, long since having gathered what little evidence there was. What exactly they expected to find, is beyond him. The case is more or less clear. Orion’s wand is the one piece of evidence necessary.

“Abbot, report. What is the suspect’s condition?”

Abbot? He looks at the Auror in question. He’s not familiar with him, but then again Abbots and Blacks rarely socialised outside of the Wizengamot.

“He will live through today,” comes the smart reply from the Auror still working on his son. “Other than that, it’s anyone’s guess. Whatever the boy did to him, it was powerful. The leg will likely have to be regrown entirely.”

“Can it be,” asks one of the unnamed Aurors. “Regrown, I mean. Considering.” His tone is light and slightly curious, and Arcturus is torn between approval and affront.

“It should be, if you can believe it. Dark magic didn’t cause this. It responds to healing without any resistance at all.”

“*Really*,” perks up the Malfoy look-alike. “What *did* cause it, then? Cause, from where I’m standing, the kid burned out magic out of him entirely.”

“Pardon me,” Arcturus asks. He can’t have heard him correctly.

“None of us here are trained Healers,” says Shacklebolt, a thrum of iron adding weight to his tone. “We will not speculate.”

Arcturus tunes out the squabbling Aurors, desperately trying to forget everything in the past five minutes.

“Grandfather, Sirius is awake, and he can’t hear,” says Regulus all of a sudden. When did he even get here? Circe wept, these children…

“He can’t hear?” Why can’t he hear? “Auror Shacklebolt, do you know anything about this?”

“No, indeed not. Abbot, check on Heir Black. Locke, Fiddlewood, assist but be smart about it. Rest of you, give Lord Black and myself some space.”

With a strangely floaty mind, Arcturus pauses to consider—How long has this day been, already? The morning was so bittersweet. Calm. His grandchildren were moving in. The Castle will finally house true Blacks, not like Orion—or Arcturus, for that matter. Was that this morning? It feels like it was a week ago. Melania would laugh at him if she could summon up enough attention—Merlin’s mercy, man. Focus.

“—Lord Black?”

“Do excuse me,” he says, entirely too weary to try to bluff. “My mind wandered.”

“Of course, Lord Black,” hums Shacklebolt. “I merely wanted to—Ah. Warn you, I suppose. I would like to give you a full guarantee that my team will remain quiet. They will not. Locke will; Abbott, Fiddlewood and a few others; myself, naturally. Not all. If you try to fight the media, you will lose. What are Heir Black’s plans?”

The words take a while to meander through the fog that has become his mind, and for a moment, an insatiable urge fills him to be honest with this man. To sit, sigh and cry, and be the old man that he is.

It passes, like it always does, after a few moments.

“It is noble of you to warn me, Auror Shacklebolt, but I am aware. I am too old to delude myself in these matters.” He pauses for a moment and scrutinises the Auror waiting patiently for the point. Fair enough, he’s especially long-winded today. “I would just ask you to keep the medical information out of it.”

Shacklebolt doesn’t twitch so much as a muscle. “I will try, of course. I will not succeed. I am limited by the law. For some of them, harming House Black will be more important than keeping their place of employment. I will fire them, I will fine them, I will arrest any who sell personal medical information. They will still do it.”

“Sirius is a minor,” he points out. Why are you wasting your breath? He is right.

The Auror cocks his head. “It is, and I will pursue each infraction as far as the law will allow. Even if we somehow, succeed, it will only be a temporary victory. Do you think the trial will be a private one?”

Of course it won’t be. In this, Sirius is harmed by his position. A mudblood child would be easily afforded the dignity of a closed session. Sirius will be torn up for the public’s amusement.

“It might,” he says halfheartedly. “I can petition the Wizengamot.”

“House Shacklebolt will stand with you when you do. It won’t happen. Let’s not waste time __”

The Auror breaks off in the middle of his sentence, with an uncharacteristically readable twitch of exasperation. Arcturus follows the man's gaze. Of course. Regulus is spitting venom at an Auror, standing in front of Sirius like a little chimaera.

"Excuse me, Lord Black. It seems my best and brightest have, in fact, reverted to their pre-Hogwarts years."

"By all means."

He considers following, but, as a second wave of dizziness hits him, he decides Shacklebolt is competent enough to handle this. He needs to think. A political hurricane has been brewing; everyone knows it. The mudbloods are dissatisfied, the Halfbloods are dissatisfied, and the Purebloods are dissatisfied. House of Black needs to be strong, and their leadership consists of a mediocre Lord and a potentially crippled Heir. Sirius hasn't even been seen by the Healers, they don't know what the torture has done to his mind. The Prophet is probably already printing the lurid special edition, a Black Scandal of the generation.

It would be a fine world where he could simply bid farewell to the political side of things and focus on keeping what's left of his family alive and, if possible, in possession of a modicum of dignity. Unfortunately, he wouldn't do his grandchildren any favors if he spared them a little pain now, at the cost of a disaster later. No, a decisive step needs to be taken. Risks need to be assessed. A plan has to be put in place before Sirius goes to Hogwarts. If, indeed, he is able to go.

Great Lady, but his head hurts.

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# Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

The Aftermath

**Itachi POV**

His mind is—flabby.

What?

The bizarre adjective sizzles in his mind; the state between sleep and wake crumbles.

It's not, he admits, a bad descriptor. His mind does feel flabby. Slow, unsightly, filled with redundant material.

Open your eyes.

Why?

Open. Just. Open.

Oh, *alright*.

He cracks his eyes open and blinks. What now?

Well, suggests his mind, why don't you try to remember where you are, why you're here, and what happened in the past twelve hours?

Why am I even talking to myself?

"Why am I even talking to myself?"

Whoops—did he say that out loud?

"That would be the potions," answers the room.

"Oh? How delightful." It's a good thing he had opened his eyes, or he might have never met a talking room. "Merry meet, honoured room. Have we been properly introduced?"

"Oh, we've been introduced," says the room. "Can you move your head?"

"Possibly. Why," he asks. "And where would your vocal apparatus be? Is it in the walls?"

"Turn your head to the left, and I will explain."

That's an offer no man can refuse. What an opportunity! He will learn about a room's speech mechanics.

"Oh, Regulus," he says eyes widening. "Have you met the honoured room?" He turns his head back. "Honoured room, may I introduce Regulus Black, a god among brothers, an

emperor among scholars."

"You weren't talking to the room, 'Tachi. You were talking to me. Now turn your head and look at me."

Oh.

"You're a much better option than a room." He pauses. "It would have been fascinating to speak to a room, but on the whole, I would much rather speak to you. No matter where the room's vocal box might be."

"Well, your tongue seems to be working fine," says his brother, apropos of nothing.

"I should hope so. It's not *my* vocal box that is in question, bright star. It's the rooms!"

Regulus sighs, but he's smiling, so that means it's okay. Itachi smiles back.

"No, no, no, brother. You smile, then I smile, then you keep smiling. That's how it goes!" He didn't get anywhere near enough of that lovely expression.

"How are you feeling, 'Tachi?" His brother doesn't return to smiling, but his eyes are less sad, which is good enough.

"Stupid. Flabby. Like I am a skin-suit controlled by two warring factions of stupid, flabby hamsters. The ones in my head are lazy and unmotivated and want to grow ever stupider and flabbier. Their enemies are the hamsters in my arms and legs who want to grow lean and strong and are very angry about this. Yeah, that about covers it."

"Alright, that's—not ideal. But I promise it's temporary. You will feel much better when you wake up next."

Itachi frowns. There is something—not. There is something not about Regulus. He reaches for his magic—It shrieks at him, wounded and afraid.

“Reg—Wha—” is all he has time to say before dark takes him.

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Well, that was weird, he thinks upon coming back to consciousness.

Ow, is the second thought.

“On the whole, I might prefer the potions,” he croaks.

“I do not,” says Regulus. Ouch. His brother is not in a joking mood.

He turns his head slowly, nursing his headache.

“‘Lo, bright star. How are you holding up.”

Regulus looks like he was eaten through by worry and terror, leaving behind the raw centre; like a very concentrated version of himself. Or maybe just one aspect?

“It’s Monday evening, brother. How do you think?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t know what has happened. To me, to you, to Grandfather. Speaking of, where is Kreacher?”

“With the Aurors.”

“Excuse me?”

“Officially they’re gathering evidence that Kreacher can wriggle through Wards. Unofficially —who knows? It could be some sort of bribe, he could be a witness, I don’t know. ”

“What is going on?” His memories may be fuzzy, but from where he’s standing, the law should firmly be on his side.

“I don’t know. Nobody will tell me anything. Grandfather is meeting with a lot of Lords. Nobody will let me see the papers. Our room is guarded by a team of Hit Wizards hired as private security. I’ve been here for over thirty hours. Kreacher was whisked away more than a day ago and you—you—”

Yeah, okay, whatever happened is not important. “Come here, dear heart.” He says. “I would levitate you if I could, but something tells me I shouldn’t do magic just yet.”

Regulus looks like he is so ground down, that he doesn’t know what he wants, anymore.

“Up, up. Apart from the headache, I feel fine. I can handle cuddling with my little brother.”

A hollow laugh escapes from Regulus. “You almost died, you know.” He says, climbing up the bed slowly. “You were mutilated. The doctor had to regrow parts. Your nerves might never heal. And the healers kept telling me it’s highly likely your mind is broken for good.”

Amateurs.

“I’m sorry, little brother,” he says. There is nothing more to say, really.

“I’m so angry with you,” whispers Regulus. “You could have run, you could have hidden. You didn’t even try. You sent Kreacher away and went to fight an adult.”

There is a lot he could say to that. A lot of excuses and explanations and a lot of them would even be his right to say. In the end, though, Regulus is more right than he knows. Even if he could have run, even if they escaped the Wards, at that time, he probably would not have run.

“That’s okay. It was a really stupid thing to do.”

“You don’t have the same powers anymore. You don’t have the physical enhancements, the all-seeing eyes, the optimal body for a physical fighter. You’re just a kid here. You could have died. You could have left me alone. *You could have died*.”

The flood of self-loathing hits and leaves devastation in its wake. You had one job to do. You had to keep Regulus safe, and away from all this trauma, and you failed. You let him believe you would always protect him, and you let him down.

He’s crying now—

—because of you—

—are you—

—happy now—

—*m u r d e r e r?*

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**Arcturus POV**

Arcturus gets summoned by healers in the middle of a meeting with Lord Malfoy and Lord Nott.

Sirius.

“Don’t,” he says as his feet touch the floo-room of St. Mungos. He immediately starts a brisk walk to Sirius’s wing, a trail of clucking incompetents trailing behind. “I am talking. When I say 'go', you will inform me what has happened to my Heir in your care. After that, I will inspect him myself. If I do not like what I see or what I hear, the wrath of House of Black will crush this puny little building before sundown. Go.”

The healers are quiet for a moment, trying to figure out if he’s joking or not. Finally, a Junior Healer speaks with a faintly irritated tone. “Heir Black has fallen into a severe panic attack, after conversing with his brother. His body was still weak from all the procedures and leftover dark magic. He went into tachycardia that we caught before it progressed into cardiac arrest. We sedated him with dreamless sleep, and separated him from Mister Regulus Black who confirmed he caused the attack.”

“Thank you, Healer Abernathy,” he says. “I need to speak to my grandson. If everything is as you say, my gratitude for saving my Heir’s life will be suitably expressed.”

“Of—of course.” The Healer stumbles her words slightly. Perhaps she didn’t expect him to know her name. Foolish. As if he would let an unknown healer work on his Heir.

“I will find you when I need you,” he says and slams the door in their faces. “Merry part,” he adds to the closed door. That was uncouth.

The two security teams jump on making sure he is who he says he is. To save time, he summons a lick of Family Magic, enough to form a ghostly crest of House Black. That is

usually enough to prove his identity, but the enterprising hit-wizard hits the conjuration with a finite to check if it's a simple illusion. Clever.

"Just take these, sir, and you're good to proceed."

The man hands him two pills—muggle aspirin.

He swallows down the medicine, and asks, "What is your name, young man?"

The man doesn't answer. Of course.

He sits as patiently as he can for the required six minutes. It was a creative solution, he reminds himself. Not many would remember salicylic acid is fatal when combined with Boomslang skin, and he likes the idea of poisoning polyjuiced enemies looking to get access to Sirius.

"Garnall Prott, Lord Black," the hit-wizard says finally.

A wizarding name. A half-blood at least. Good. "Excellent thinking. I will speak to you when I get some time. Merry part."

And he will. No time for that now, though. He needs to deal with the latest drama before his next meeting, Merlin preserve them.

Regulus is a tiny ball of misery, curled up in an arm-chair, in an otherwise empty patient room. The elf sits beside him, to the right, smoothing the boy's hair.

"Sirius will be fine, in case you weren't informed." Let's open with the essentials.

“Kreacher told me.”

“Good. Now—what happened.”

He listens to the whole sorry affair and carefully doesn’t say the first couple of things that come to mind. Regulus is just a child. They both are. This is normal. It’s expected, even. Or, it should be?

How on earth is Arcturus the one who has to explain this? The two brothers were always so close, he would have sworn a mess like this could never happen.

“That was ill-done of you. It’s not your brother's fault he is injured.”

“It is, though.”

He blinks, taken aback. He hasn’t expected the boy to double down. Desperate denials and tearful apologies, he would have known what to do with.

“He didn’t have to fight,” continues Regulus. “He could have run.”

“Run where, exactly,” he asks, banishing the incredulity from his voice. “The elf squeezed through the wards; Sirius could never have managed the same. E if he did—would you fault him for defending himself?”

A child’s face has no business sneering. *This* sneer is downright sick. There's too much desperation in it; too much poison. Walburga shines from the twisted lips and the cold, Black eyes.

“Elf, leave us. This is a conversation for family.”

The blasted creature doesn't even look at him.

"Kreacher is family," the boy spits.

Keep your cool. You won't get anywhere if the nine-year-old baits you into an argument. He has named his terms. If Regulus wants to talk, he knows what to do.

"Please, Kreacher, if you don't mind," says Regulus quietly, while glaring at Arcturus.

"I will be in the shadows."

Much better.

"Now," says Arcturus. "It sounds to me like you're angry at your brother for not being invulnerable. That is ridiculous. I would swear on my magic the boy had always done his best by you. He went to the house to get your things."

Regulus remains stubbornly quiet. Children.

"In either case, unless you *wanted* to kill him, there are better ways to express your sentiments, as childish as they might be. Sirius's nervous system is severely compromised. The healers had to sedate him to prevent cardiac arrest."

Quiet.

"Well, I suppose you will have time to think about it. Sirius is going to Hogwarts tomorrow. You can continue your very justified diatribe when he returns home for Yule."

"What—no—" There you are. "You can't—He can't go! He's sick! You said—"

“He has to go,” he says over the broken-up monologue. “He is the Heir to House Black. You both made sure of that. Well, Heir to House Black doesn’t get to show weakness, especially not now, less than a week after acquiring his new position. He will go to Hogwarts, and he will excel. There is no other option.”

“You—Grandfather, *please*, he can’t go—“

Arcturus sinks some more magic into his Occlumency barriers. “He can and he will. The teachers will be notified he is not to use magic for the first few weeks, and that his health is sub-optimal. That is as much as I can do.”

“But—”

“But nothing. The two of you have set the rules of this game, you have placed the stakes, and you have played your hand. There is no sense in arguing against the results.”

“This is not a game,” snaps Regulus. “This is his life!”

“Yes. You could have come to me, months ago. Years ago. You could have asked me to remove you from your parents’ care. You chose to publicly back me into a corner, and force me to name your brother Heir. Well, now that he is the Heir, he has to fulfil the obligations of one. I will not allow two children to destroy our House so easily.”

Regulus rears back as if slapped, but it doesn’t hold him back for long.

“We shouldn’t have to ask to not be abused,” he says, voice dropping down into a mean hiss. “Stepping in is your *responsibility.* You should have dealt with them. You should have saved us. What good is a Noble House if this is how we are treated?”

His Occlumency barriers quake, and he closes his eyes, breathing through the pain in his chest. The boy's instincts are very good; he knows how to target his blows. Poor Sirius.

"Naturally, as the adult, I am the most to blame. I wouldn't dream of denying it. That doesn't change the situation."

"Yes, it does! Why are you punishing Sirius for your mistakes?"

"Punishing?" He inhales deeply. His hands want to shake. "I would have gladly kept the boy in Castle Black for another decade. That is simply not possible. He needs to show he is alive, he is strong and that House of Black is still to be reckoned with. There is more at stake here than just us. Britain is on the cusp of a civil war. We cannot be seen as weak when the wolves come."

Regulus glares at him, but can't think of anything to say.

"Sirius will be going to Hogwarts. That is beyond your control. Consider that it will be good for him to go, too."

"No, it won't," Regulus says. Spits, more like. "He should stay here, with me. With Kreacher." The *fire* in him. If only it was tempered with a little wisdom.

He is only nine. He will learn. "You just sent him into cardiac arrest, Regulus. I wouldn't leave him with you either way."

"I—"

"No. I have spent more time than I can afford arguing with you. Think before you speak, and think before you accuse. You are angry at me, and you have every reason to be but antagonising me is a stupid move. You are not the genius Heir, you are not the powerful Lord. Your power is your brother, and your power is me. You are pushing away your brother out of fear and stubbornness, and you are antagonising me out of spite and righteousness.

Soon you will only have your house elf. That is not where you want to be." Cool it. You are talking to a nine-year-old child. "Now, I have a meeting with Lady Longbottom and Lord Shacklebolt, where I will try to cajole them into voting with us to keep the press out of the trial and spare Sirius at least a little pain. Think about what you want, child, and how you plan to get there."

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**Regulus POV**

Lord Black leaves the room—Leaves him *alone*—

There is a monster in his stomach that just—takes over. The anger the fear and the pain twist together and form a monster that just wants to destroy everything.

He—he doesn't know what to do—He's—

This is not *him*—This is not Regulus—Regulus is the smart one—Regulus is the peaceful one—

Regulus has just spit on every one of his family members.

No—no—They're wrong—They're all *wrong*—They're all stupid and wrong and they all *leave me*—

"Kreacher," he gasps. "Kreacher, please. Please—"

"I am here, bright star."

Kreacher's voice is a balm; it douses the sick fire burning in his chest. He buries his head in the elf's lap and pretends, for just a moment, that nothing at all is out of the ordinary. That he is having a normal evening, sitting next to the fire.

"Was he—is Grandfather—is he *right*? Kreacher did I—Did I—"

Kreacher's silence is damning.

*He is lying*, seethes the monster. *He is lying to hurt you. He is like all of them*.

Stop it—stop it—stop it—

"Stop it," he says out loud. Maybe it will help? Maybe if he says it louder?

"Stop what, little star," says Kreacher gently. His hand doesn't falter for a second, slowly carding through the disgusting, greasy hair.

"Make it stop, Kreacher," he begs. "Please, make me stop."

"I cannot, dear heart. I do not know how."

"I am just—I am just so *angry*."

"Yes," Kreacher says.

"It's not—It's not normal—I can't think—I *can't*—"

“You are a Black, dear heart. You are passionate, brave, and strong. But you are also very young.”

The rage that surges through him is so strong, it blacks out his vision. His jaw trembles, his teeth itch—the urge to bite something sparks in his mind—bite down on something—make something *bleed*—

“I am sorry you do not like the truth, my child, but it is the truth. I cannot help you with this. Even fae-magic cannot help you fight your own demons.”

The demon—the monster—that is him?

“It’s not—it’s not me—I would never have—”

Kreacher remains silent and continues to smooth his hand through his hair.

“It’s not.” It can’t. “It can’t be.”

“You are not perfect. You have darkness in you. Everyone does. Yours just grew too big too quick, and nobody taught you how to handle it.”

Merlin, but the elf sounds condescending. What right does it have, to talk down to him like this? Like it even knows anything? Like it even knows how to be a person—

Horrified at himself, he stops the thought in its tracks.

“I’m—I’m scared Kreacher—I—I don’t mean to say these things—I don’t mean to think these things—I—This isn’t me.”

“I am scared too, my child. I am sad too. I cannot help you, and I wish to more than anything. Both of my shining stars are in pain, calling for help, and there is nothing for old Kreacher to do but be by their side and hope.”

“I’m—I’m sorry.” He never knew how painful those words could be. They tighten around his throat, making his heart race and his eyes burn. He feels dizzy.

“I know, bright star. I am sorry too.”

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# Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

A/N: Edit Sep '23. Only changes are for style and such. Content is the same.

He wakes up slowly. Whatever they drugged him with, it was damn powerful, and also the best damn thing he has ever felt. His sleep isn't restful, as a rule. No, his dreams are typically plagued with death and ruin and all the unresolved issues he has amassed over the years.

Dreamless Sleep, then. He can see why it's classified as highly addictive. In a different scenario, Itachi knows how he would have exited this life. A cauldron of Dreamless Sleep, a quiet, far-flung place and a peaceful transition into the great night.

"While letting you rest would be my preference, we simply don't have time for it."

Who—Arcturus.

"Where is Regulus?" Let's establish the necessities first.

"Regulus is hale and healthy, if not in the best of spirits. You have, I am sorry to say, more pressing worries."

Itachi smiles faintly. He has truly become free with his facial expressions; yet another sign of improvement to his previous life. "Nothing is more pressing than Regulus." He pauses for a moment. "Like I imagine nothing is more pressing than Dorea."

That huff of displaced air might have been a laugh. It seems Arcturus is trying hard to signal his emotions more clearly. Nice of him.

“Fair point. The healers tell me you should be all healed up, physically speaking. Are you?”

“Well,” he says, taking stock of his condition. The artificial calm still holds. Good. “Let’s see.”

The Lord is right. The body feels more or less perfectly healthy. His hands tremble, which is annoying, and he’s weak as a kitten, but other than that—nothing.

“Healers had done good work. Other than the predictable aftereffects, I am whole.”

“Excellent. We have a difficult conversation ahead. I would have your complete honesty. I offer my own in turn.”

Something about Arcturus’ tone makes Itachi’s hazy and focus. He can’t tell what it is. Arcturus doesn’t sound *concerned,* but maybe—Disturbed? Itachi takes a moment to settle into a sitting position and, for the first time today, turns to look at Arcturus.

The Lord looks a rich aristocrat’s version or exhausted. Perfectly groomed, tall and unbent. Only the sunken eyes and battle-lights in his eyes betray his less-than-stellar mood.

“I try to be frank with you when I can,” Itachi says honestly. “I see no reason why I would stop doing that now.”

“Good enough. Now, to the best of your knowledge, are you capable of going to Hogwarts tomorrow?”

Itachi blinks. “Of course I’m going to Hogwarts. I am Heir Black. Heir Black that has likely murdered his father. Either I am going to Hogwarts or I am taking Reg, getting us disinherited and hiding in the jungle for a decade or so until the air settles.”

Something unclenches in the Lord, a tension that wasn't visible until it was released. "Circe, it is a joy to talk to someone with sense. Alright. I will be blunt. The House of Black is under considerable fire. Your altercation with Orion has been leaked to the press practically before the Wards fell. Speculation is rife."

The press is still something that Itachi is getting used to, honestly. Nothing similar would ever be allowed in Konoha.

"I imagine my going to Hogwarts ostensibly whole and healthy will dispel a lot of those rumors," he says reasonably. Arcturus looks back at him, with a faint look of surprise. That wasn't the correct answer. "I—don't care?" No? Try another approach. "No, I do care, very much, but am certain that it will die down?"

Arcturus's lip twitches, and he finally sits down into a wide, cushy armchair next to Itachi's bed. Instead of the cultured, controlled pose, he sits with his knees wide apart, leaning his elbows on his legs, in a shockingly casual sprawl.

"Your composure in the face of what would horrify most adults is as gratifying as it is disturbing. Alright. That resolves one significant issue. I was concerned that the weight of the public opinion would be too stressful. Nevertheless—a warning. You have lead a very sheltered life, in a lot of ways; being the centre of attention will be daunting."

Itachi raises a skeptical eyebrow. Really, now? "I am an established prodigy, from a notoriously Dark House, in a school lead by the Light Lord. Are we pretending that I would have been given anonymity, if not for this?"

"True." The Lord leans back into his armchair. "This conversation alone has soothed most of my worries, Sirius. Your mental state was—I was prepared to have to force you to go to Hogwarts. The politics of this disaster are truly unfortunate."

"Tell me."

After a long scrutinising look, the Lord inclines his head. "Alright. How aware are you of the political situation in Britain right now?"

“Not very,” he says. “It’s not what you might call within my sphere of interest.”

“It had better become one, Heir Black,” Arcturus says with a faint smirk. “Lord Riddle, who you have met, much to my horror, has been—starting a movement, for lack of a better term. Riddle—he is a bit like you: powerful, charismatic and magically gifted. On his opposite is the Light Lord, Albus Dumbledore. Understand, nobody is satisfied with the current regime, the Dark Purebloods least of all. A fight is coming one way or the other.”

Well, this is depressingly familiar.

“And where do we stand?” He asks, proud of how cool his voice is. “House Black is the darkest of the Dark. Where are we in this little war?”

Arcturus meets his eyes, and for perhaps the first time real understanding passes between them. “I would have kept us neutral, as long as I could. Now, I do not know. I cannot see how we can avoid picking a side.”

Itachi can think of a few ideas, but maybe that’s best left for a better time.

“I think I have a solid grasp on Lord Riddle; a violent man, but reasonable if approached correctly. What are the other sides?”

Arcturus is quiet for a moment. It is gratifying he takes Itachi seriously. “Dumbledore leads the Light Purebloods. Riddle holds Dark Purebloods. The Halfbloods are—in-between, and nobody cares about the mudbloods.”

“Oh?” Now, this is odd. “Isn’t Dumbledore a champion for Muggleborn rights?”

Arcturus tosses his head in a very equine gesture. “He pretends to. The measures he works to get passed only take power away from Purebloods, Dark Purebloods most notably. He hardly

gives it to the mudbloods, after."

Itachi's eyebrows tick up slightly. That doesn't seem very probable. Arcturus, in response, waves an impatient hand. "The Light Purebloods have already spent a lot of their power. Only few still own their ancestral land, artifacts and such. It's in Dumbledore's best interest to hamstring us to by instituting measures that would ostensibly limit everyone, when in practice only affecting us."

"A solid strategy." Not really. "And the creatures? Vampires, Werewolves, Veela and such?"

"The Light won't have anything to do with so-called 'Dark' creatures, and the few creatures they haven't labeled as 'dark'—Centaurs, Merefolk, and such—don't want anything to do with humans as a whole."

The conversation falls into a natural pause, both of them lost in thought.

"We could play both sides, I think." If they were slow, careful and very lucky. "Riddle is a reasonable man. If we become invaluable for both sides, they will let us be."

"I doubt that I can pull it off," says Arcturus. "I am a miserable old misanthrope who wants to be left alone in my Castle. People confuse me, my temper runs away from me, and my views are too old-fashioned even for you, my Heir. Then there is the matter of the current scandal. Nobody wants a weak ally, and neither side will take us—or offer favourable terms—if we need them more."

Hmm.

"Aunt Cassie."Now that is a good idea. "Aunt Cassie and Aunt Dorea. Put Aunt Cassie in the Wizengamot, and Lady Dorea in charge of the administrative side." He pauses, spinning the thought as far as it can go. "As for the scandal, it's hardly a difficult spin. If I were dead, it would be different, but I'm alive and functional. It's a victory, is my point, and we can spin it as a power move."

An expression of disquieted grief flashes over Arcturus' face. "You realise that this plan relies, chiefly, on you? Reporters will harass you, your classmates will give interviews to the press. You need to be entirely beyond reproach."

"Will I be necessary for the trial?"

"It seems unavoidable." Arcturus pauses, regulating his breathing like a professional. "I've been trying to get a gag-order passed through the Wizengamot, to keep the trial closed and the press out. We will not succeed. The Light and most of the Neutrals will refuse outright, and they have the majority."

Well, the only path forward seems obvious to Itachi, but he gives the words a little thought just in case. "Don't waste your political capital on it. Let the reporters do as they will. We have nothing to hide. I didn't use Black magic; I didn't even use Dark magic. We can spin it."

A ripple of indignation tenses the Lord's shoulders, and fury shades the cheekbones with a bit of colour. "It is perverse. You're underage. No matter how you look at it, dragging your reputation through the mud is the height of dishonour."

Itachi hums. "Then shame with their dishonour later. *After* we regroup and deal with the trial."

"This is exhausting." Arcturus sighs. "Moving on from endless circles: Regulus. I am tempted to tell you to stay away from him until tomorrow. Hogwarts express leaves at eleven. We cannot afford another panic attack that turns into heart failure."

Itachi grimaces. "I have to see him. I will consent to a Calming Draught. Speaking of—what can I expect at Hogwarts? Will my instructors be informed?"

Arcturus closes his eyes briefly, slumping back even more. It's nice that the Lord has decided to drop the haughty Pureblood Lord persona. Itachi is starting to enjoy this informal, petulant man.

“I have a meeting scheduled with the Deputy Headmistress in twenty minutes.”

Itachi pauses, thinking. Wouldn’t it be—

“You could bring her here? So she can see me and know that you’re not manipulating her for whatever reason. It would be good to have her on our side.”

Arcturus gives him a flat look, but there is curiosity there too.

“Minerva McGonagall is never going to be on our side. But your suggestion is not a bad one. You’re, quite demonstrably, much better with people than I am. At the very least, bringing her will underline that you are still ill.”

“But not so ill to not be able to attend the lessons. Speaking of, will I be able to attend lessons?”

Arcturus’ hum is equal parts amused and distressed. “As long as you stay away from using magic for at least three weeks. Your classes don’t start incorporating magic until October, so that shouldn’t hamper you.”

“Well, then. It seems the plan is set. The Deputy will meet with us here, we will convince her I am but an injured lost lamb in need of patience and understanding. We ignore the gossip until Christmas, when we send out a public statement, saying how this is all really gauche, and really, the Wizarding Public should be ashamed. I come back for holidays, we throw Riddle his event, and finish the year with glory and triumph.”

“Excuse me,” says Arcturus. “Minerva McGonagall is hardly dull and will under no circumstances consider you a lost lamb. More importantly, what is this about Riddle? Who is in no way a Lord?”

Ah.

He widens his eyes and arranges his muscles in the most innocent manner he can, tilting his head just-so. “I may have, to avoid incurring a future unspecified debt to Lord Riddle, promised to host an event in his honour at Castle Black. Did I not mention that?”

Arcturus looks back at him in mute horror.

“Oh come now,” he says. “It’s far from the worst thing I’ve done.”

“And you—you talk about neutrality—Sirius, for goodness’ sake -”

“It’s all a part of the plan.” Time for some wild fucking improv. “We host this event for Lord Riddle, around Yule, but *then* we host another event for Lady Longbottom the following season, to celebrate her Heir’s Coming of Age.” Oh wow, this is going better than he expected. “We show we are willing to actively support both sides, and not whoever is leading currently.”

Arcturus watches him for a long moment, not saying a word. “You’ve made that whole speech up on the spot. Riddle caught you flatfooted, and you liked him enough to honour the debt. You actually admire that reptilian nightmare.”

Itachi tilts his head, shrugging. “Well. I initially offered to sneak him into the Library for a day. The event was his idea.” He stretches his lips in a smile, theatrical, yes, but refreshingly honest. He’s enjoying the conversation. *This* Lord Black is excellent company.

Arcturus answering smile has a defeated edge. “A worry for a later time. Did you know who he was before you offered him a platform? That he is the leader of a rising political faction?”

Itachi looks back to what he has come to know about the enigmatic man, aptly named Riddle, and see-saws his hand. “No, but it’s not a stretch to imagine it. He has an unmistakably commanding presence, and all the other Pureblood Lords defer to him unquestionably. Plus his magic is a wonder.”

“They would,” grumbles Arcturus. “The current continent of Lords—Malfoy, Nott, LeStrange, they all were all more or less in the same generation as Riddle. He started young.”

Much like you, hangs in the air, observed but unaddressed.

“As fascinating as Lord Riddle is, you have a Deputy to fetch. Do you mind summoning me some attire that isn’t—this?”

“Fine, nightmare-child. I need to be away from you for a few minutes anyhow. Try not to murder anyone, befriend any current or future terrorists, or start any riots, if you please.”

“I will endeavour to contain myself.”

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Minerva McGonagall is the epitome of beautiful woman that dares you to mention or even acknowledge that fact. In many ways, she reminds Itachi of Yūgao, and he bets that she, like Yūgao leaves behind a trail of destruction when provoked. Fair, but deadly, and with a fiery temper to match the dark-auburn locks.

She strides into the room with brisk steps, walking next to (but very deliberately not with) Arcturus. Her age is in that indeterminate span between twenty and sixty. Judging by the real respect Arcturus pays her, and how naturally she accepts it as her due, it is likely she is a Pureblood Lady of some importance.

“Merry meet, Lady McGonagall.”

“Merry meet, Heir Black.” Her nod is as brisk and no-nonsense as the rest of her. Itachi is delighted. “For today, the appellation suits. After this day, do address me as Professor? There

are rules about how the traditional portion of our students go about their days without causing unnecessary disruptions to the learning. Not everyone observes the same practices as we do, after all."

Her teaching profession really shines though, he notes with admiration. Not a minute into the conversation, and she has managed to spin an informative and valuable lesson.

"To get back to the matter at hand, your Lord Grandfather has been very cryptic about the nature of your condition. I will not even comment on your security detail. Why the secrecy and what needs to be done to facilitate a productive time at Hogwarts?"

He casts his eyes to Arcturus. The Lord's shoulders twitch at him in a distinctly helpless fashion. He's on his own, here.

"As you say, Lady McGonagall. The secrecy is for my sake. I was involved in an altercation with my former guardian, Mr Orion Black and to a lesser extend Walburga Black. The Aurors have it well in hand, but my Grandfather and I thought it best to inform you directly. Hogwarts will be a target of heavy media attention in the next few months."

It's been a while since Itachi has interacted with an adult not so carefully guarded as Dark Purebloods. The Lady is professional, but her emotions are transparent; shock, anger, disgust, determination, it's all there, written on her face in neat, blocky letters.

"I assure you, Heir Black, that Hogwarts and her staff is more than able to fend off reporters. Are you fit to start the semester? There is precedent for a delay, if necessary."

Itachi smiles his most inviting smile. "The Healers have given me a go-ahead, my Lady. Most of our worries consist of my—reception, let's say. The Prophet is incentivised to be sensational in nature. I suppose in the end we would like some reassurance I will not be unduly harassed by students or staff, because of this incident."

Lady McGonagall's expression grows heavier the longer he speaks. "I expect that report on my desk by the end of tomorrow, Heir Black. As for your worries, they aren't unreasonable

or unfounded. The staff will do what they can, but ultimately we cannot outlaw unkind words."

"My lady," he says. "I do not put much stock in the opinion of my peers. I would simply ask to keep the—disagreements—verbal."

She levels a steady look his way. "I will guarantee the perpetrators will be punished appropriately. Some might try to escalate, I suppose. Some always do. But most of what you can expect will be verbal and social in nature. In that, teachers' interference would be to your detriment, I think."

"Thank you for you understanding, my Lady."

"Indeed. Merry part, Heir Black. Lord Black."

# Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

An end and a beginning

Regulus refuses to talk to him.

Kreacher dragged him to Itachi's room, but can't force him to talk.

Honestly, Itachi doesn't want to force him. A lot is riding on his nonexistent stability; he can't afford a breakdown. Experienced or not, Dark magic is Dark magic. The wounds are there. As his recent tumble into heart failure can attest, his body cannot follow the demands of his lifestyle. How very nostalgic.

It would be simpler, perhaps, to throw caution to the winds, throw a tantrum and refuse to go to Hogwarts. It might even be kinder to the children. Throwing a mentally unstable Shinobi into a building full of civilian young is a recipe for disaster. Throwing *Uchiha Itachi* in one sounds like a joke made in poor taste. And yet—

Itachi has a little brother now, and he deserves a life. Their options, should they run, are not excellent. Once disinherited, they become wards of the Ministry, and thus bargaining chips for the vultures there, to be handed out to the highest bidder.

Running from Britain is an option, but he knows very little about crossing magical borders. If they are, as he suspects, guarded by complex workings, they wouldn't have any hope of crossing as they are now. Staying in British wilderness, maybe—But, most of the territory on the Isles is already divided between the Noble Houses and warded appropriately. That leaves just unclaimed territory and the non-magical world. Two young, valuable boys out in the open would be the target for a number of unsavoury characters, human and creature alike. And recent events have shown how unprepared they are to face such threats on their own.

Their best bet would be to seek refuge in one of the creature enclaves. The Goblins might shelter them for a price. What that price might be, is what's worrying him. Chances are high that one or both of them would end up in indentured servitude, and that's not a risk he wants to expose Reg to. The centaurs might accept them, as might the vampires if they agree to be turned. The forests of Ireland are populated by dryads and nymphs which could be bargained with perhaps. And of course, there are the mythical Seelie and Unseelie Courts, the mere thought of which sends dread trickling down his spine.

It's a sea of bad options, in short. In contrast, there is the current arrangement. Regulus stays behind some of the strongest, oldest Wards in the country, protected by vast wealth and influence. Itachi attends a prestigious institution where he can work to bridge the gulf between a prodigious child and a fully trained wizard. It seems pretty simple, even without the bonus of a simmering civil unrest which will make hiding that much more challenging.

Itachi has to go to Hogwarts. His fate—Regulus's fate—is tied to that of House Black for the next five to six years.

If he is to go to Hogwarts, he best not risk another potentially fatal heart attack. He has already taken the first step to prevent that—sufficiently diluted calming draughts. The second step—the more important step—is to avoid any conversations with Regulus. It feels like a betrayal, that he is grateful for the silent treatment, but he is. His brother is, purely by being his brother, ideally placed to destroy his composure by a single off-hand comment. Right now, when stakes are this high, he can't afford the risk of a temperamental nine-year-old taking his grief out on him.

So, Wednesday morning is spent in silence. Itachi's supplies are packed and ready in a lovely trunk engraved with the Black crest. His Heir ring glints on his finger. He is washed, primped, hit with several charms of unknowable purpose, and equipped with a thick binder of Healer's reports to give to McGonagall.

Ten o'clock comes, and Kreacher moves from his spot behind Itachi. His hands pause in combing through his hair. Itachi misses them fiercely already.

"It is time to leave."

“Thank you Kreacher,” he says. The calming draught smooths his tone into a light drawl, easy and unconcerned. It’s a sign of weakness that he needs it at all. How appropriate, he thinks; he feels supremely weak today.

Their path to Hogwarts Express is geographically confused. Out of London’s West End, they apparate to Castle Black, in the unplottable Black Lands in the North-West of England. From there, they take the Floo to a Magical cafe on King’s Cross Station.

The atmosphere, once the three Blacks exit the floo is—stifling. The cheerful bustle of families walking to and fro freezes and stops, and all eyes snap to Itachi. Gasps are heard, heads turn their way—one little girl even bursts into tears. It’s all very dramatic.

Itachi, drugged to his eyeballs, ignores them with aplomb. His chin is high, expression frozen in a mask of superior calm. His luggage hangs off his wrist as a charm on a bracelet, and his robes are immaculate. Arcturus moves first, taking long but unhurried steps towards the correct platform. It’s interesting, he thinks, that the three Dark Purebloods fit in with the Muggles so well. In contrast, most of the Wizarding population swan in with trunks and owls, pointy hats on full display, wands tucked into the pockets of their trousers.

“I take it this charming tradition is only required for the first trip,” he asks Arcturus. “A floo to Hogsmeade is surely more than adequate if it’s the Ward scheme that we need to observe.”

“Not at all. Students ride the Hogwarts Express all seven years. Even those that live in Hogsmeade.”

Itachi is still trying to determine if that was a joke or not, when they reach the platform.

“Go on.”

“There is no point in protesting, is there,” he asks, eying the wall between platform nine and platform ten.

“Indeed not.”

Itachi sighs.

He refuses to run into a wall, but there seems no reason to. It’s just a silly tradition. Well, Itachi will not be bowling over some hapless first year—or indeed be bowled over by one—for someone’s twisted sense of humour. He strolls forward, and indeed, the illusion lets him pass without issue.

Wizards.

He has already said his goodbyes to Kreacher, and honestly, he plans to call him this evening so that he can squeeze some comfort out of his Unseelie parent. Regulus hasn’t looked him in the eye since their argument, so that’s a bust. Grandfather stopped being Grandfather since the floo, and Lord Black doesn’t hold to such silly notions as sentiment.

He looks them over once. His family. Kreacher stands half-visibly behind Regulus, large eyes filled with proud grief. Regulus is a vision, as always, sharply dressed, and chubby-cheeked, loose ringlets falling around his face in an artful mess. Lord Black is the soul of dignity, looking back at him with a steely confidence. He nods back at him. He will be the best damn Black the school has ever seen—until Regulus comes along, naturally.

“Merry part.” He can’t think of anything better to say, so he compensates with a low bow. “I love you,” he adds under his breath, pitched so it doesn’t carry past his family.

Without waiting and being disappointed by a lack of reply, he turns sharply on his heel and enters the train.

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